



Clinical paper

Hypokalemia during the cooling phase of therapeutic hypothermia and its impact on arrhythmogenesis[☆]Sultan A. Mirzoyev^{a,d,1}, Christopher J. McLeod^{a,1}, T. Jared Bunch^c, Malcolm R. Bell^a, Roger D. White^{a,b,*}^a Division of Cardiovascular Diseases, Department of Internal Medicine, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, MN 55905, United States^b Department of Anesthesiology, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, MN 55905, United States^c Department of Cardiology and Electrophysiology, Intermountain Heart Rhythm Specialists, Murray, UT 84107, United States^d Mayo Medical School, Rochester, MN 55905, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 31 March 2010

Received in revised form 26 July 2010

Accepted 6 August 2010

Keywords:

Heart arrest

Potassium

Tachyarrhythmias

Polymorphic ventricular tachycardia

Therapeutic hypothermia

ABSTRACT

Background: Mild to moderate therapeutic hypothermia (TH) has been shown to improve survival and neurological outcome in patients resuscitated from out-of-hospital cardiac arrest (OHCA) with ventricular fibrillation (VF) as the presenting rhythm. This approach entails the management of physiological variables which fall outside the realm of conventional critical cardiac care. Management of serum potassium fluxes remains pivotal in the avoidance of lethal ventricular arrhythmia.

Methods: We retrospectively analyzed potassium variability with TH and performed correlative analysis of QT intervals and the incidence of ventricular arrhythmia.

Results: We enrolled 94 sequential patients with OHCA, and serum potassium was followed intensively. The average initial potassium value was 3.9 ± 0.7 mmol l⁻¹ and decreased to a nadir of 3.2 ± 0.7 mmol l⁻¹ at 10 h after initiation of cooling ($p < 0.001$). Eleven patients developed sustained polymorphic ventricular tachycardia (PVT) with eight of these occurring during the cooling phase. The corrected QT interval prolonged in relation to the development of hypothermia ($p < 0.001$). Hypokalemia was significantly associated with the development of PVT ($p = 0.002$), with this arrhythmia being most likely to develop in patients with serum potassium values of less than 2.5 mmol l⁻¹ ($p = 0.002$). Rebound hyperkalemia did not reach concerning levels (maximum 4.26 ± 0.8 mmol l⁻¹ at 40 h) and was not associated with the occurrence of ventricular arrhythmia. Furthermore, repletion of serum potassium did not correlate with the development of ventricular arrhythmia.

Conclusions: Therapeutic hypothermia is associated with a significant decline in serum potassium during cooling. Hypothermic core temperatures do not appear to protect against ventricular arrhythmia in the context of severe hypokalemia and cautious supplementation to maintain potassium at 3.0 mmol l⁻¹ appears to be both safe and effective.

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1. Introduction

Improvements in resuscitation practices have increased survival following out-of-hospital cardiac arrest, yet the majority of patients still do not survive.^{1–3} To further improve the survival rates, ongoing review and alteration of current protocols are necessary. The neurological benefit of mild therapeutic hypothermia (TH) on outcomes after OHCA^{4,5} has led to this practice being recommended by the American Heart Association as Class IIa therapy in patients with ventricular fibrillation (VF) as the cause of arrest.⁶ Anecdotal reports and reported experience^{7,8} have described declines in

serum potassium during TH. However our current understanding of the effects of hypothermia on human physiology and electrophysiology remains incomplete. Malignant ventricular arrhythmias continue to be a major cause of in-hospital death after OHCA and although these in part may be driven by myocardial ischemia and reperfusion, hypokalemia and hyperkalemia are frequently implicated.^{9,10} This study was undertaken to review our experience with the arrhythmogenic milieu during TH and to propose optimal management strategies.

2. Methods

This is an observational study from the Division of Cardiovascular Diseases, Department of Internal Medicine at The Mayo Clinic, Rochester, and was approved by the Institutional Review Board. Patients who sustained an OHCA between December 2005 and August 2009 in our public service area (PSA) and 17 surround-

[☆] A Spanish translated version of the abstract of this article appears as Appendix in the final online version at doi:10.1016/j.resuscitation.2010.08.007.

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ing communities outside our PSA were included. Patients within our PSA were transported by ground ambulance, and those who presented to regional hospitals outside our PSA were airlifted by helicopter to our hospital. Data regarding the cardiac arrest and subsequent outcomes were collected in a prospective manner. Emergency Medical Services (EMS) personnel provided initial interventions, including both basic and advanced life support as needed. Ventricular fibrillation was the presenting rhythm in 87 patients (93%), in accord with the 2005 guidelines which recommended TH for patients presenting in VF.⁶ In addition, later in our experience seven patients who sustained a witnessed pulseless electrical activity (PEA) or asystolic arrest but who responded to therapy with return of sustained spontaneous circulation yet remained comatose or unable to follow verbal commands were included. When automated external defibrillators (AEDs) were utilized the presenting rhythm and pre- and post-shock rhythm data were obtained from the devices in all instances. Patients were included if cooling could be commenced within 4 h of arrest and the arrest was of documented or presumed cardiac origin. Two patients who sustained VF arrests in our hospital (Emergency Department in one and Cardiac Catheterization Laboratory in another) were also included. Both underwent TH after prolonged and difficult resuscitations resulted in improved hemodynamics but unresponsive mental state.

Therapeutic hypothermia was terminated in seven cases before completion if mandated by advanced directives, severe hemodynamic or respiratory failure or family request for withdrawal of care. Hypothermia was initiated en route in 32 patients by helicopter flight personnel with infusion of up to 2 l of iced saline in combination with ice packs on the groin, in the axillae, and around the neck. Upon admission to the CCU patients were started on continuous infusions of midazolam and fentanyl prior to initiation of muscle relaxation with atracurium. Atracurium was terminated as soon as possible once the target temperature was achieved. Core temperature was monitored by a bladder probe and the Arctic Sun® (Medivance, Inc, Louisville, CO, USA) thermoregulation system was employed to achieve and maintain a core temperature of 33°C for 24 h. Rewarming proceeded using the same system at a rate not exceeding 0.5°C h⁻¹. Sedation was terminated after normothermia was achieved. Patients who did not regain consciousness received full supportive care for at least 72 h after restoration of normothermia. An overall performance category (OPC) score was used to assess clinical outcome and was assessed at discharge using categories of 1 (good recovery) or 2 (moderate disability) on a five-category scale as neurologic recovery; the other categories were 3 (severe disability), 4 (a vegetative state), and 5 (death).¹¹ Blood glucose was monitored every 2 h throughout cooling and rewarming, and insulin infusion therapy was initiated in all patients to maintain blood glucose of 120–140 mg dl⁻¹. Anti-arrhythmic agents (amiodarone in all instances) were prescribed for hemodynamically unstable atrial or ventricular arrhythmias.

The majority of patients with ST-elevation myocardial infarction underwent initiation of TH immediately prior to proceeding to angiography or at the time of angiography. Serum potassium was measured every 2 h during cooling and rewarming and for 24 h after restoration of normothermia. Other electrolytes were also measured though not with the same frequency. Electrocardiograms were obtained at baseline and on a daily basis unless rhythm disturbances required more frequent recording. Measurements of QRS and QTc intervals were obtained manually on each patient and were blinded to patient details. Bazett's formula was used to correct for heart rate. In addition, continuous telemetry recordings were analyzed electronically for mean changes in QTc during cooling and rewarming and utilized for QTc measurements during the hour in which PVT occurred. Arterial catheters were placed in all patients and the mean arterial pressure was maintained at 70–80 mm Hg with inotropic support as needed. Serum potassium concentrations

Table 1

Patient baseline characteristics, and further grouped by the development of polymorphic ventricular tachycardia (PVT).

Baseline characteristics	n = 94 (%)	PVT	No PVT
		n = 11	n = 83
Age, years	63.2 ± 13	64.5 ± 11	63.0 ± 12
Male sex	73 (78)	7 (64)	66 (80)
BMI, kg/m ²	29 ± 7	27 ± 5	29 ± 7
Diabetes	32 (34)	2 (18)	30 (36)
Hypertension	60 (63)	7 (64)	53 (64)
Coronary artery disease	31 (33)	3 (27)	28 (34)
Arrest witnessed	79 (84)	9 (82)	70 (84)
Response times (min)	5.8 ± 3	5.8 ± 2	5.8 ± 3
Ventricular fibrillation	87 (93)	10 (91)	77 (93)
ST-elevation MI	43 (46)	6 (55)	37 (45)
Angiography	77 (82)	10 (91)	67 (81)
Primary PCI	43 (46)	6 (55)	37 (45)
Amiodarone use	58 (62)	7 (64)	51 (61)
Pressor use	46 (49)	8 (72)	38 (46)
Left ventricular ejection fraction	38.9 ± 17	32 ± 15	41 ± 17
Survival to discharge	58 (62)	6 (50)	52 (63)
Median OPC score at discharge	1	1	1

Values are n (%), or ± standard deviation. TdP refers to Torsades de pointes. There was no significant difference between groups with any of these variables.

below 3.0 mmol l⁻¹ were replaced intravenously to maintain levels at or just above that level with 10 mequiv. increments every hour. Serum magnesium was replaced with magnesium sulfate if less than 1.8 mg dl⁻¹, measured every 2–4 h until hypomagnesemia was corrected. Magnesium repletion was needed in 16 patients. Polymorphic ventricular tachycardia (PVT) was defined as ventricular tachycardia with a variable morphology and a progressive change in cardiac axis, sustained for sufficient duration to cause hemodynamic deterioration.

2.1. Statistical analysis

All results are expressed as mean ± standard deviation. To establish differences between groups, analysis of variance was performed. To compare values time, repeated measures analysis of variance was employed and followed by paired *t*-tests. Contingency analysis was performed to assess relationships between continuous variables and compared using Pearson's chi-square test. *p* < 0.05 was considered to indicate statistical significance.

3. Results

The average age was 63.2 ± 13 years, and 73 (78%) were male. The average body mass index was 29 ± 7 kg m⁻², with 33% and 34% of patients having a history of coronary disease or diabetes mellitus, respectively. A history of hypertension was present in 63% (Table 1). Seventy-nine (84%) of the patients sustained a witnessed arrest, with an average response time (from collapse until emergency personnel arrival) of 5.8 ± 3 min. Ventricular fibrillation was the presenting rhythm in 87 patients (93%). Forty-three patients (46%) had ST-elevation myocardial infarction, and all of these patients underwent primary percutaneous intervention of the culprit vessel. The mean left ventricular ejection fraction measured with either transthoracic echocardiography or magnetic resonance imaging was 38.9 ± 17%. These measurements were obtained within 72 h of admission (mean of 29.2 ± 18 h).

Among all patients, 58 (62%) survived to discharge with a median overall performance category (OPC) score of 1. Of the 87 patients presenting with ventricular fibrillation, 59 (68%) survived to discharge with a median OPC score of 1 at discharge. During TH 58 patients (62%) received intravenous amiodarone, while one patient received lidocaine and 3 patients received magnesium sulfate. One patient's diagnosis was made posthumously after genetic

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