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Review

Pathophysiology of cardiorenal syndrome in decompensated heart failure: Role of lung–right heart–kidney interaction

M. Guazzi [a,*], P. Gatto [b], G. Giusti [b], F. Pizzamiglio [b], I. Previtali [b], C. Vignati [b], R. Arena [c]

[a] Heart Failure Unit, Cardiology, IRCCS Policlinico San Donato, University of Milano, Milano, Italy
[b] Postgraduate School of Cardiology, University of Milano, Italy
[c] Department of Physical Therapy, College of Applied Health Sciences University of Illinois at Chicago, USA

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ABSTRACT

Cardiorenal syndrome (CRS) is defined as an interaction of cardiac disease with renal dysfunction that leads to diuretic resistance and renal function worsening, mainly with heart failure (HF) exacerbation.
Hemodynamic variables linking heart and kidney are renal blood flow (cardiac output) and perfusion pressure, i.e., the aortic – renal venous pressure gradient. CRS has traditionally been interpreted as related to defective renal perfusion and arterial underfilling and, more recently, to elevation in central venous pressure transmitted back to renal veins.
Our suggestion is that in a setting where aortic pressure is generally low, due to heart dysfunction and to vasodrepressive therapy, the elevated central venous pressure (CVP) contributes to lower the renal perfusion pressure below the threshold of kidney autoregulation (≤80 mm Hg) and causes renal perfusion to become directly pressure dependent. This condition is associated with high neurohumoral activation and preglomerular vasoconstriction that may preserve pressure, but may decrease filtration fraction and glomerular filtration rate and enhance proximal tubular sodium absorption. Thus, congestion worsens and drives the vicious cycle of further sodium retention and HF exacerbation. Lowering CVP by targeting the lung–right heart interaction that sustains elevated CVP seems to be a more rational approach rather than reducing intravascular volume. This interaction is crucial and consists of a cascade with stepwise development of pulmonary post-capillary hypertension, precapillary arteriolar hypertone, right ventricular overload and enlargement with tricuspid incompetence and interference with left ventricular filling (interdependence). The resultant CVP rise is transmitted to the renal veins, eventually drives CRS and leads to a positive feedback loop evolving towards HF refractoriness.
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1. Introduction

Cardiorenal syndrome (CRS) describes a coexistence and an interaction of cardiac disease, mainly chronic heart failure (HF), with renal dysfunction, that may lead to diuretic resistance and worsening of renal function [1,2]. The former condition is currently named CRS Type 2 and refers to a chronic state of kidney and heart disease in which a reciprocal negative interaction is apparent, although the complexity of the mechanisms makes the pathogenesis difficult to define [3].

On the other hand, therapy aimed at relieving congestive signs and symptoms of acute HF exacerbation and diuretic resistance, defined as persistent pulmonary congestion despite attempts at diuresis [3], may be associated with further renal function deterioration [3–5]. Although this condition which is currently named Type 1, more appropriately represents the acute subcategory, cardiologists currently identify it with the CRS. The present review will focus the lung–right heart–kidney interaction as a key multiorgan system dysfunction possibly triggering and sustaining the pathophysiology of the disease.

2. Hemodynamic background

In chronic HF and in acute exacerbation, renal impairment [3,6], mainly if associated with venous congestion [7,8], is one of the most significant determinants of prognosis. The generally accepted hemodynamic variables linking heart function to the kidney are renal blood flow and renal perfusion pressure (RPP). RPP is the gradient between aortic and renal venous (right atrial) pressures and is a determinant of the flow along with the cardiac output. CRS has traditionally been interpreted as a consequence of an insufficient renal perfusion, which decreases disproportionally fast with declining cardiac output [9], and of hypovolemia generally due to overzealous prescription of diuretics. Nevertheless, it has long been recognized that a backward transitory transmission of central venous pressure (CVP) elevation leads to direct renal dysfunction [10–12].

* Corresponding author at: Heart Failure Unit, Cardiology, I.R.C.C.S. Policlinico San Donato, University of Milano, Biomedical Sciences for Health, Pza Malan, 1 20097, San Donato Milanese, Milano, Italy. Tel./fax: +39 02 52774966.
E-mail address: marco.guazzi@unimi.it (M. Guazzi).

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Recent human data provide convincing evidence that high CVP opposing venous return from kidney, and lowering the RPP, is associated with impaired renal function [6]and independently related to all-cause mortality in a broad spectrum of patients with cardiovascular disease [12]. In the presence of pulmonary hypertension with right ventricular dysfunction and relatively preserved cardiac output, CVP elevation is associated with reduced glomerular filtration rate [6]. In a prospective study of 145 patients with advanced decompensated HF, Mullens and co-workers [13] have shown that venous congestion (both with increased CVP on admission and inadequate decrease of venous pressure with treatment) is the strongest hemodynamic determinant of CRS, whereas progressive or persistent reduction of cardiac output may not have a primary role in the development of the disorder. Thus, according to the current literature, hypervolemia with increased central venous and renal vein pressures is suggested as the primary cause for congestion of the kidney and CRS. The most accredited interpretation of the pathophysiological substrate is that raised central venous pressure causes extravasation with congestion of the kidney, increase of the renal interstitial pressure leading to hypoxic state of the renal parenchyma, tubular dysfunction and activation of the renin–angiotensin system (RAS) [14,15].

A complementary or alternative way of interpreting the mechanistic role of the renal venous pressure in CRS is considering the venous pressure as a component of the perfusion pressure and not simply as a consequence of congestion. When venous pressure is exceedingly raised, mainly if in combination with a reduced mean aortic pressure, the RPP may be lowered to ≤80 mm Hg, that is the threshold of kidney autoregulation. Related to this, three points are firmly established: (i) below the threshold of autoregulation, renal perfusion becomes directly pressure dependent [9]; (ii) in acute decompensated HF, mean aortic pressure, because of pump inadequacy and/or therapy with diuretics, beta-receptor blockers, RAS inhibitors, tends to become reduced and mean right atrial pressure tends to become raised because of right ventricular dysfunction and tricuspid regurgitation; (iii) in this setting, a high degree of neural and humoral activation produces preglomerular vasoconscriction that sustains blood pressure, but decreases filtration fraction and glomerular filtration rate [15] and enhances proximal tubular sodium and water reabsorption [16,17].

According to the renal function curve [18] depicted in Fig. 1, when arterial pressure (that in normal individuals closely corresponds to renal perfusion pressure) rises above a critical level, loss of extracellular fluid from the body becomes greater than fluid intake, and this decreases both blood volume and cardiac output, returning the pressure back to normal. On the contrary, when aortic pressure falls below this same critical level, the kidney reduces fluid excretion, blood volume and cardiac output increase and pressure returns toward the equilibrium point between salt intake, fluid and salt excretion and renal perfusion pressure.

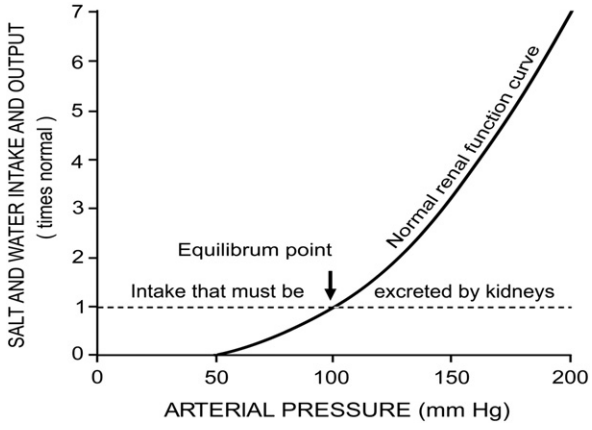

Fig. 1. Equilibration of the normal renal function curve with salt and water intake. The equilibrium point gives pressure level at which kidney-fluid mechanism will control arterial pressure. From reference 18, by permission.

The picture is different in decompensated HF patients in whom pump failure can prevent recovery of aortic pressure despite an increase in blood volume, and the elevated right atrial pressure assumes a critical role in reducing the driving pressure through the kidney. In this setting, the possible benefits of a decrease back towards normal of right atrial and renal venous pressure can be easily perspected. Otherwise, the potential results may be oliguria, fluid retention, worsening of congestion, drive of the vicious cycle of further sodium retention, volume expansion, HF exacerbation.

That in decompensated HF excessive CVP, defective RPP and neurohumoral activation are linked with renal function, oliguria and fluid retention, is convincingly supported by results with fluid withdrawal and congestion relief with ultrafiltration (UF) [19,20]. In these, studies patients having oliguria, congestion, higher CVP and lower RPP had also higher levels of circulating norepinephrine (NE), renin and aldosterone. In these patients, and not in those without overhydration and venous congestion, UF caused an extreme potentiation of sodium and water excretion associated with neurohumoral modulation, CVP reduction and RPP recovery.

3. Diuretics and UF as remedies to venous congestion

Diuretic therapy tailored to overcome diuretic resistance, and extrarenal methods, such as UF, aimed at fluid withdrawal and relief of congestion, are the main currently available strategies for reducing venous congestion in decompensated HF. Which of the two is safer and more effective, is a matter of debate and still unsettled [21–24]. There are, however, three peculiar features of the extrarenal method that deserve mention. One is that in continuous hemofiltration, fluid and medium-sized solutes are removed, allowing for clearance of various agents, some of which may be contributing to CRS. Subtraction of proinflammatory cytokines [3,5,25,26] or sodium-retaining vasoconstrictive agents, is potentially involved in improvement in urinary output or restoration of diuretic responsiveness [19,20,27]. A typical example is that of circulating NE, whose inactivation process by the lung endothelium [28] may become exhausted with cathecholamine overflow. NE withdrawal by the mechanical method of UF has been proven to reactivate the metabolism process, to trigger a positive feedback loop between fall of circulating NE and recovery of the lung metabolic activity [29] and to result in sustained modulation of the catecholaminemia [29,30].

A second peculiarity is that the ultrafiltration-mediated neurohumoral regulation, as reflected by a drop in plasma BNP [31], norepinephrine, renin and aldosterone [19,20], is sustained (Fig. 2). This is probably a reason why improvement in clinical signs and symptoms of volume overload were found to be persistent at 90-day follow-up after isolated UF [31], functional capacity was enhanced in another same duration trial of patients undergoing UF [32] and the procedure was associated with fewer rehospitalizations compared in to diuretic therapy [33]. Interestingly, when a similar amount of fluid was removed by furosemide, both neurohumoral and exercise performance did not improve (Fig. 2).

A third topic which deserves mention is the mechanisms whereby UF reduces the right atrial pressure. Patients with acute decompensated HF and ≥2 of the following: peripheral or sacral edema, enlarged liver or ascites, orthopnea, pulmonary rales or pleural effusion, jugular venous distention, diuretic resistance, were subjected to UF with contemporary monitoring of right atrial pressure, hematocrit and serum sodium concentration taken as indices of the relative water content of the blood [34]. As shown in Fig. 3, hematocrit and serum sodium concentration were steady until an average of 2000 ml of fluid was withdrawn, indicating that water removed from the intravascular space was replaced by a similar amount of reabsorbed fluid from the extravascular phase. In parallel with and in spite of this, a stepwise drop in mean right atrial pressure was observed. With further fluid withdrawal, some hemoconcentration