

Reentrant ventricular tachycardia after myocardial infarction in the rabbit heart

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Summary

In patients with chronic ischemic heart disease ventricular tachyarrhythmias are a major cause of mortality. Electrophysiological studies have demonstrated that reentry is the underlying mechanism of these arrhythmias. Surviving myocardial fibers in the infarcted region are crucial for the genesis of reentrant tachyarrhythmias. Studies in dogs have shown that VT usually originates from the site surviving epicardial myocardium overlying the myocardial infarction. Early in the process the fibers in the epicardial border zone are still orientated parallel to each other but are separated by edema or connective tissue because of differences in conduction parallel and transverse to the fibers (anisotropy), functional reentrant circuits can be initiated around lines of functional conduction block (anatomically reentrant). Reentrant excitation around an anatomical obstacle like a large coronary artery is assumed to be a mechanism of VT (anatomically reentrant). Part of the anatomic circuit may consist of a tract of surviving myocardium embedded in scar tissue. No direct longitudinal electrical pathway through the scar is assumed.

Summary and Conclusions

and the reentrant circuit is assumed to be an anatomical circuit usually consisting of a tract of surviving myocardium embedded in scar tissue. Reentry is assumed to be the circulating impulse, not a discrete wave of excitation, to gain part of its circuit. Due to directional differences in conduction velocity, the reentry is dominant to the fibers it travels through. The reentry is assumed to be an anatomical circuit usually consisting of a tract of surviving myocardium embedded in scar tissue.

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analysis and interpretation

Summary

In patients with chronic ischemic heart disease ventricular tachyarrhythmias are a major cause of mortality.¹ Electrophysiological studies have demonstrated that reentry is the underlying mechanism of these arrhythmias.² Surviving myocardial fibers in the infarcted region are crucial for the genesis of reentrant tachyarrhythmias.³ Studies in dogs have shown that VT usually originates from the thin surviving epicardial borderzone overlying the myocardial infarction.⁴ Early in the healing process the fibers in the epicardial borderzone are still orientated parallel to each other but are separated by edema or connective tissue.⁵ Because of differences in conduction parallel and transverse to the fibers (anisotropy), functional reentrant circuits can be induced around lines of functional conduction block (anisotropic reentry).^{4,6,7} Reentrant excitation around an anatomical obstacle like a large myocardial scar or a ventricular aneurysm has also been demonstrated to be a mechanism of VT (anatomic reentry).⁸ Part of the anatomic circuit may consist of a tract of surviving myocytes embedded in scar tissue, forming a continuous electrical pathway through the infarct.⁸

Both functional (or anisotropic) as well as anatomical circuits usually comprise a zone of slow conduction. During anisotropic reentry the circulating impulse propagates perpendicular to the fibers in part of the circuit.⁶ Due to directional differences in resistance, the conduction velocity perpendicular to the fibers is three times slower than the conduction velocity parallel to the fiber orientation.⁹ Slow conduction in anatomical circuits has been attributed to 'zig-zag' conduction in the network of surviving fibers,¹⁰ increased gap-junctional resistance between the myocytes,¹¹ or reduced excitability of the myocytes.¹² Recent studies have emphasized the role of a high wavefront curvature in slowing of conduction.¹³ The objectives of this thesis were 1) to characterize the conduction properties of pivoting wave fronts with a high curvature in the subepicardium, 2) to study the characteristics of reentrant VT in rabbit hearts with a healed myocardial infarction, and 3) to characterize the conduction properties of the chronically infarcted myocardium.

Conduction around a Pivot Point

The studies were performed in isolated Langendorff perfused rabbit hearts. The right ventricle, the interventricular septum, and the endo- and midmyocardial layers of the free wall of the left ventricle were ablated by a cryoprocure, only leaving a thin sheet of left ventricular subepicardium intact. In the epicardial layer, the fibers are arranged in a longitudinal fashion. A thin linear lesion was made parallel to the fiber orientation by radiofrequency (RF) ablation. The RF-lesion was extended by a short incision. Electrical stimulation next to the lesion elicited a wavefront which made a sharp U-turn around the tip of the lesion. A high density mapping electrode (240 electrodes, resolution 350-700 μ m) was used for detailed analysis of the activation pattern of the U-turn.

In **Chapter 2** we demonstrated that the conduction velocity of the impulse decreased considerably during pivoting around the tip of the lesion. The fast longitudinal conduction

velocity of 70 cm/s along the lesion slowed down at the pivot point to 15 cm/s. Since the conduction velocity perpendicular to the fibers was 30 cm/s, slow conduction at the pivot point could not be explained by an increase in electrical resistance alone. The high curvature of the pivoting wavefront must also play a role. A general reduction of the inward sodium current by infusion of potassium or flecainide depressed conduction of the pivoting wavefronts about 1.6 times more than conduction of planar waves. This preferential effect was due to discontinuous conduction and functional conduction block at the pivot point. Especially during high frequency stimulation or early premature beats lines of functional conduction block occurred at the tip of the anatomical lesion. Because the wavefront was now forced to make a wider turn around the lesion, the conduction delay at the pivot point increased markedly.

In **Chapter 3** we demonstrated that the preferential depression of conduction at the pivot point resulted in prolongation of the shortest attainable coupling interval of a premature beat distal to the pivot point (distal V1-V2 interval). Since the distal V1-V2 interval was longer than the refractory period a clear excitable gap was created in the descending limb of the U-turn. Infusion of flecainide prolonged the excitable period in the descending limb of a premature U-turn from 30 to 55ms. The widening of the excitable period due to preferential conduction delay at pivot points may explain the antiarrhythmic effects of the class I drugs.

Reentrant VT in Rabbit Hearts with a Healed Myocardial Infarction

To study the mechanisms of VT in rabbit hearts with a healed myocardial infarction, a myocardial infarction was produced surgically by ligation of side-branches of the left coronary artery. The peri-operative mortality was 23%. About three months after the operation, the rabbit hearts were excised and connected to a Langendorff perfusion system. The characteristics of the model are described in **Chapter 4**. In hearts with a healed myocardial infarction ventricular tachyarrhythmias were induced more easily and more frequently than in control hearts. After the cryoprocure (described above) sustained monomorphic VT could be induced in 70% of the infarcted hearts compared to 25% in controls. In the epicardial layers of 41 hearts with a healed myocardial infarction 68 different VTs were induced. The activation patterns during VT were studied by a spoon shaped mapping array molded to the epicardial surface, containing 248 electrodes with an interelectrode distance of 2.25mm. Four different types of reentrant circuits were observed: 1) anatomic reentry around the scar (16%), 2) anatomic reentry comprising a segment of slow conduction through the scar (61%), 3) reentry within the scar (13%), and 4) functional reentry outside the infarct (10%). In some hearts VTs with a different morphology could be induced. This pleomorphism was due to different exit sites of the reentrant impulse from the infarct or to a different direction of rotation. Also different VTs with the same morphology but with a different cycle length could be induced. This was due to a change in conduction time of the reentrant impulse through the infarcted area. Histologic examination of the hearts showed

that in case of reentry around the scar a continuous ring of normal epicardium was present around the scar. In case of reentry through the scar several isolated bundles surrounded by fibrotic tissue were found in the infarcted area which formed an almost continuous tract of surviving myocytes from one end of the infarct to the other side. Also in case of reentry within the scar surviving myocytes were embedded in the fibrotic tissue of the myocardium.

Although the cycle length of the different types of VT varied considerably, on average the tachycardias comprising a segment of slow conduction through the scar had the slowest rate. The cycle length of these VTs was mainly determined by the conduction time of the circulating impulse through the infarct. The conduction time through the infarct resulted in a 'diastolic' interval, since during normal amplification of the electrograms electrical activity was not recorded from the scar. However, at high gain (up to 4000x) small potentials became visible, completely bridging the diastolic interval. The effective conduction velocity through the infarct was usually less than 20 cm/s, which was slower than conduction parallel (70 cm/s) and perpendicular to the fiber orientation (32 cm/s). In a few hearts the electrical activation of the infarcted area was studied by ultra high resolution mapping (resolution 500 μ m). The differences in activation time between adjacent electrodes varied between 0 and 40ms (local conduction velocity about 1cm/s). Long local conduction delays in the infarct especially occurred at sites of changing tissue geometry such as the entrance and exit of the slow conduction zone and at branching points of tracts of surviving myocytes.

In **Chapter 5 and 6** we tested the effects of programmed electrical stimulation on VT. Both during reentry around the scar as well as during reentry through the scar a large excitable gap was present. During VT around the scar, the duration of the excitable gap mainly depended on the size of the anatomic circuit whereas during VT through the scar the excitable gap was mainly determined by the conduction time through the segment of slow conduction. Because late premature beats already conducted with considerable delay through the slow conduction zone, the partial excitable gap during VT through the scar was longer than during VT around the scar. Early premature stimuli frequently terminated VT through the scar by causing conduction block in the segment of slow conduction. The ability to terminate VTs through the scar by single premature stimuli was associated with a long segment of slow conduction, a steep slope of the reset curve and a large difference in functional refractory period between the normal myocardium and the infarct. VTs around the scar usually could not be terminated by single premature stimuli. The different types of VT also responded differently to overdrive pacing. Whereas VTs through the scar were always terminated by overdrive pacing, in contrast VTs around the scar were usually accelerated. Termination of VT through the scar was due to conduction block in the area of slow conduction and was often preceded by an increase in conduction time through this zone (Wenkebach block). Acceleration and / or changes in morphology of VT by programmed electrical stimulation were due to changes in exit site of the reentrant circuits, induction of

double wave reentry or ventricular fibrillation.

In **Chapter 7** we tested the effects of antiarrhythmic drugs on the different types of reentrant VT. The class Ic drug flecainide markedly slowed the rate of all types of VT by a strong depression of conduction. The efficacy to terminate VT depended on the type of reentry. The concentration of flecainide needed to terminate a VT through the scar was half the concentration required to terminate a VT around the scar. Termination of VT through the scar was always due to conduction block in the slow conduction zone. Flecainide depressed conduction in the slow conduction zone twice as much as conduction in the non-infarcted part of the ventricle. At therapeutic concentrations the class III drug d-sotalol hardly affected VT. The calcium channel blocker verapamil terminated 1 of 3 VTs.

Conclusions

Conduction properties of U-turning wavefronts and the mechanisms of reentrant VT and slow conduction in healed myocardial infarction were studied in Langendorff perfused thin layers of subepicardium of the rabbit heart by high density mapping. A reduction of the rapid Na^+ current by high potassium or flecainide preferentially depressed conduction of U-turning wavefronts by causing discontinuous conduction and functional conduction block at the pivot points. The preferential conduction delay at the pivot point created an excitable gap in the distal limb of the U-turn. In the rabbit model of healed myocardial infarction different types of reentrant VT could be induced with similar characteristics as clinical VTs. Most circuits comprised a zone of slow conduction through the scar but VT could also be based on reentry around the scar. These two types of VT could be distinguished by their response to programmed electrical stimulation and antiarrhythmic drugs. Conduction through the infarct was slow and discontinuous. The results of ultra-high density mapping of the slow conduction zone showed that abnormal conduction especially occurred at branching sites of strands of surviving myocytes. The effects of premature stimulation and antiarrhythmic drugs on conduction in the slow conduction suggested that slow conduction through the infarcted area was not solely due to reduced cellular coupling between the surviving myocytes. A source to sink mismatch at sites of changing tissue geometry and reduced excitability of the surviving myocytes may contribute to slowing of conduction in a chronic myocardial infarction.

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Samenvatting

Hartritmestoornissen zijn een belangrijke doodsoorzaak bij patiënten die een hartinfarct doorgemaakt hebben. Deze ritmestoornissen zijn gekenmerkt door een snelle hartfrequentie en zijn afkomstig uit de hartkamers, een situatie die wordt aangeduid als kamertachycardie. Kamertachycardiëen die optreden na een hartinfarct berusten doorgaans op cirkelgeleiding van de elektrische impuls. Hierbij wordt de impuls als het ware gevangen in een cirkelpad. Dit cirkelpad blijkt te worden gevormd door overlevende hartspiervezels in het infarctgebied en bezit doorgaans een zone waarin de elektrische impuls abnormaal traag wordt voortgeleid. Ondanks vele studies is het nog niet geheel duidelijk welke vormen van cirkelgeleiding in de chronische fase van een hartinfarct kunnen optreden en wat de oorzaak van trage geleiding in het infarct is. Zo is bijvoorbeeld pas uit recent onderzoek gebleken dat met name ook de curvatuur van een elektrisch golffront een belangrijke determinant van de geleidingssnelheid is. Ook is nog onvoldoende begrepen waarom de behandeling van kamertachycardiëen met behulp van geneesmiddelen, pacemakers en ablatietechnieken bij de ene patient wel en bij de andere juist weer niet effectief is. De studies in dit proefschrift werden uitgevoerd om 1) de geleidingseigenschappen van scherp draaiende golffronten met hoge curvatuur te onderzoeken, 2) te bestuderen welke vormen van cirkelgeleiding kunnen optreden in de chronische fase van een hartinfarct, 3) de effecten van elektrische stimulatie en anti-aritmische geneesmiddelen op de verschillende vormen van cirkelgeleiding te analyseren, en 4) trage geleiding door het hartinfarct te karakteriseren.

De studies werden uitgevoerd in geïsoleerde, Langendorff geperfundeerde konijnenharten. Door middel van een vriestechniek werd de hele rechter hartkamer en de binnenzijde van de linker kamer gedood, zodat er slechts een dunne buitenste (of epicardiale) laag spierweefsel van de linker kamer overbleef. In deze epicardiale laag zijn de spiervezels in lange evenwijdige banen gerangschikt. Om de geleidingseigenschappen van scherp draaiende golffronten te bestuderen werd in de dunne epicardiale laag een lineaire laesie parallel aan de vezelrichting gemaakt d.m.v. radio-frequency (RF) ablatie (**hoofdstuk 2**). Aan het uiteinde van de RF-laesie werd een dunne snede gezet. Door vlak naast de RF-laesie te prikkelen werden golffronten opgewekt, die een scherpe U-bocht rond de laesie maakten. Met een high density mapping electrode (240 elektrodes, onderlinge afstand 350-700 μm) werd de elektrische activatie van de U-bocht geanalyseerd. De geleidingssnelheid van de elektrische impuls varieerde sterk tijdens het draaien. Tijdens voortgeleiding langs de laesie was de geleidingssnelheid 70 cm/s. Op het draaipunt nam de snelheid af tot 15 cm/s. Een algehele reductie van de depolariserende stroom door infusie van kalium of het anti-aritmische geneesmiddel flecainide vertraagde de geleiding van ronddraaiende golffronten met hoge curvatuur gemiddeld 1.6x meer dan normale recht doorgaande geleiding. Dit preferentiële effect op ronddraaiende golven werd veroorzaakt door zeer trage geleiding en geleidingsblok op het draaipunt. Met name tijdens snel prikkelen of na toediening van kort gekoppelde elektrische prikkels werden lijnen van geleidingsblok aan het uiteinde van de anatomische laesie geïnduceerd. Omdat het ronddraaiende golffront nu een wijdere bocht

rond deze lijn van blok moest maken, veroorzaakte dit extra geleidingsvertraging. De preferentiële geleidingsvertraging op het draaipunt resulteerde in een verlenging van het korst mogelijke tijdsinterval tussen 2 opeenvolgende ronddraaiende golffronten distaal van het draaipunt (distale V1-V2 interval) (**hoofdstuk 3**). Omdat het distale V1-V2 interval nu langer was dan de tijd die de spiercellen nodig hadden om zich te herstellen van de voorgaande activatie (refractaire periode) ontstond een exciteerbare periode in het afgaande been van de U-bocht. De exciteerbare periode distaal van het draaipunt verdubbelde tijdens infusie met flecainide.

Om de mechanismen van hartritmestoornissen bij konijnen met een chronisch hartinfarct te bestuderen, werd een infarct van de linker hartkamer geproduceerd door zijtakken van de linker coronair arterie af te sluiten (**hoofdstuk 4**). Ongeveer 3 maanden na de operatie werden de harten verbonden aan een Langendorff perfusie systeem. In de harten met een infarct werden vaker en makkelijker kamerritmestoornissen opgewekt vergeleken met harten zonder infarct. Nadat d.m.v. de vriesprocedure een dunne epicardiale laag was gecreëerd konden 68 verschillende ventriculaire tachycardiën (VT) worden geïnduceerd in 41 harten met een chronisch myocardiinfarct. Het activatiepatroon van de VTs werd bestudeerd door simultane registratie van de elektrische activatie van de linker kamerwand middels 248 elektroden met een onderlinge afstand van 2.25mm. Er werden 4 verschillende soorten cirkelgeleiding (reentry) onderscheiden: 1) anatomische reentry rond het infarct (16%); 2) anatomische reentry met een segment van trage geleiding door het infarct (61%); 3) reentry geheel in het infarct (13%); 4) functionele reentry naast het infarct (10%). In sommige harten werden verschillende VTs opgewekt. Het verschil tussen de VTs kon soms verklaard worden door de aanwezigheid van meerdere paden van overlevende spierbundeltjes in het infarctgebied. Dit leidde dan ofwel tot een andere uittrede plaats van de elektrische impuls uit het infarct ofwel tot een andere geleidingstijd door het infarct. In andere gevallen was het cirkelpad precies hetzelfde maar was de draairichting van de impuls tegenovergesteld. In een aantal harten werd met een hoge resolutie mapping elektrode (interelektrode afstand 500 μm) de geleiding door het infarct bestudeerd. Het verschil in activatietijd tussen naburige electrodes was soms wel 40ms, hetgeen overeenkomt met een wel zeer trage lokale geleidingsnelheid van ongeveer 1 cm/s. Trage geleiding kwam vooral voor op kruispunten van overlevende spierbundeltjes in het infarct en aan de in- en uitgang van het segment van abnormale geleiding door het infarct.

Door toediening van elektrische prikkels tijdens de VT bleek het mogelijk het type van cirkelgeleiding te differentiëren (**hoofdstuk 5 en 6**). Tijdens reentry rond het infarct leidde toediening van een vroeg gekoppelde (of premature) elektrische prikkel nauwelijks tot enige geleidingsvertraging in het reentry circuit. Deze VTs rond het infarct waren doorgaans ook niet te stoppen met zo'n premature elektrische prikkel en tijdens toediening van een reeks van 10 premature prikkels trad zelfs meestal een versnelling van de VT op. Tijdens reentry met een segment van abnormale geleiding door het infarct gaven premature elektrische prikkels doorgaans juist een aanzienlijke geleidingsvertraging in het reentry

circuit. Meer dan 50% van de VTs door het infarct kon gestopt worden met een enkele premature prikkel en alle VTs termineerden tijdens toediening van een reeks van 10 prikkels. Terminatie van de tachycardie was altijd het gevolg van geleidingsblok in het segment van abnormale geleiding door het infarct. Tevens bleek dat door elektrische stimulatie 'verborgen' paden in het infarctgebied ontmaskerd konden worden.

De verschillende typen VT reageerden ook verschillend op infusie van anti-aritmische geneesmiddelen (**hoofdstuk 7**). Zo was voor het stoppen van een VT rond het infarct een 2x hogere concentratie van flecainide nodig als voor het stoppen van een VT door het infarct. Dit werd verklaard door het feit dat flecainide de geleiding door het infarct preferentieel vertraagde. Tijdens infusie van flecainide veranderde in een aantal gevallen het reentry circuit, waardoor potentiële cirkelpaden zichtbaar werden.

Beschouwing

Om patiënten die lijden aan hartritmestoornissen zo goed mogelijk te behandelen is kennis omtrent het onderliggende mechanisme van hun ritmestoornis onmisbaar. Het doel van de studies zoals beschreven in dit proefschrift was om verder inzicht te krijgen in de mechanismen van levensbedreigende kamerritmestoornissen die kunnen voorkomen na een hart-infarct. De experimenten in de geïsoleerde konijnshartjes toonden dat, net als bij patiënten, kamertachycardiën kunnen berusten op verschillende typen van cirkelgeleiding in het infarctgebied. Door gebruik te maken van elektrische stimulatie en anti-aritmische geneesmiddelen bleek het mogelijk de verschillende typen cirkelgeleiding van elkaar te onderscheiden en informatie te verkrijgen over de geleiding van de elektrische impuls in het infarctgebied. Aangetoond werd dat abnormaal trage geleiding met name kan voorkomen op plaatsen waar de curvatuur van het elektrisch golfvront plotseling toeneemt, zoals op scherpe draaipunten en op kruispunten van overlevende spierbundels in het infarctgebied. Verder bleek dat de werking van bepaalde anti-aritmische geneesmiddelen wel eens zou kunnen berusten op preferentiële geleidingsvertraging en geleidingsblok op deze specifieke plaatsen. Als het mogelijk zou zijn om bij individuele patiënten het onderliggende substraat voor de kamerritmestoornis te typeren en de precieze oorzaken van trage geleiding in het infarctgebied te karakteriseren, zal de effectiviteit van de behandeling van deze patiënten aanmerkelijk kunnen toenemen.