Cardiovascular Magnetic Resonance: Its Role in the Diagnosis and Evaluation of Pulmonary Arterial Hypertension

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Introduction

Pulmonary arterial hypertension (PAH) is defined as a group of diseases characterized by a progressive increase in pulmonary vascular resistance caused by vasoconstriction, thrombosis, and structural remodelling of pulmonary arterioles, with occlusion of the lumen of some vessels. If untreated, pressure overload of the right ventricle (RV) leads to progressive RV dilatation and hypertrophy and end-stage heart failure within 2 to 3 years. Conventional therapy with warfarin, digoxin, and diuretics improves symptoms but has a limited effect on disease progression. Calcium antagonists, in selected patients, and prostacyclin analogs improves symptoms but has a limited effect on disease progression. Calcium antagonists, in selected patients, and prostacyclin analogs significantly improve exercise capacity and prolong survival but treatment is frequently complicated by side effects. Bosentan, an orally active, nonselective endothelin receptor antagonist, has widened the treatment options for PAH it is now an established treatment for PAH patients, often used first line, with prostanoids the first choice for more severely ill patients. Although these recent therapeutic advances have improved the short-to-medium term outcomes for such patients, early death due to progressive RV failure remains inevitable in many.\(^1,2\)

The diagnostic strategy of PAH requires a series of investigations in order to make the diagnosis, to identify the type of PAH, to evaluate the functional and haemodynamic impairment and to monitor changes in disease status and response to therapy. This diagnostic work-up, in terms of imaging and haemodynamic assessment, includes mainly echocardiography, ventilation/perfusion lung scintigraphy, pulmonary angiography and right heart catheterization.\(^1,3,4\)

Echocardiography, the most widely used noninvasive technique, is an excellent test for screening and monitoring patients of suspected or known PAH, but has several limitations. Firstly, it relies on geometric assumptions that are difficult to adopt for the complex-shaped RV. The 3-dimensional approach is more promising; however, adequate visualization of the entire RV is not always guaranteed. Secondly, echocardiography depends upon several variables such as detectable tricuspid regurgitation, body habitus, coexisting lung disease, heart rate, posture, and hydration status. (Some of these limitations also affect the accepted gold standard method of right heart catheterization.) Ventilation/perfusion lung scan provides a means for the diagnosis of chronic thromboembolic PAH and its differentiation from idiopathic PAH, but has the disadvantage of exposure to ionizing radiation. Pulmonary angiography is useful in the work-up of chronic thromboembolic PAH and right heart catheterization is required to confirm the diagnosis of PAH, to assess the severity of haemodynamic impairment and to test the vasoreactivity of the pulmonary circulation. However, they are invasive, with exposure to x-rays and (with regard to pulmonary angiography) contrast agents. More recently, spiral computed tomography and cardiovascular magnetic resonance (CMR) have been introduced for cardiac imaging in PAH. Spiral computed tomography is used mainly to assess chronic thromboembolic disease and to rule out acute pulmonary embolism, with the limitation of x-ray exposure. CMR avoids use of ionizing radiation and is increasingly used in patients with PAH for the evaluation of pathological and functional changes of both heart and pulmonary circulation.

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CMR is an attractive modality for studying the complex geometry of the RV since no assumptions...
need to be made about the shape or location of the
structure being studied. CMR has been successfully
used as an accurate and reproducible tool to quantify
ventricular volumes and mass in both normal and PAH
subjects and normal ranges have been established.1,2
Recent technological advances enable the robust
implementation of steady-state free precession (SSFP)
sequences that provide substantially higher signal-to-
noise ratio than can be obtained by conventional
gradient-echo techniques, along with excellent
contrast between myocardium and blood3 (Figure 2).
SSFP technique is rapidly becoming the preferred
cardiac CMR pulse sequence for acquisition of
volumetric data sets of the left and right ventricles
(Figure 2).
One of the advantages of CMR is that it provides
anatomical measurements and indexes that are not
influenced by factors and variables affecting
echocardiography. These anatomical indexes are
related to haemodynamic parameters clinically
relevant with PAH severity, such as the mean
pulmonary arterial pressure. The ventricular mass
index (ratio of RV mass over left ventricular mass) is
such a CMR-derived variable that provides an accurate
and practical means of estimating mean pulmonary
artery pressure noninvasively, in pulmonary
hypertension, and may provide a more accurate
estimate than Doppler echocardiography.4 The
calculation method of ventricular mass from which
this index is derived, is described in Figure 2. Ventricular mass index correlates well (r=0.81) with
mean pulmonary artery pressure at right heart
catheterisation and its sensitivity and specificity for
pulmonary hypertension are 84% and 71% respectively,
compared with 89% and 57% of echocardiography.

Moreover, short-axis curvature of the maximal
leftward displacement of the interventricular septum in
patients with pulmonary hypertension may be used as
a marker of pulmonary arterial pressure, as there is a
significant correlation between these 2 parameters.5
Septal bowing is evaluated with CMR, measured on
short-axis cine images, and expressed as curvature
(reciprocal of radius). Curvature is quantified on the
image that shows the most severe distortion of normal
septal shape. A clear linear relationship between
invasive measurements of systolic pulmonary artery
pressure and the short-axis curvature of the ventricular
septum has been found. A systolic pulmonary artery
pressure higher than 67 mm Hg may be expected
when leftward curvature is observed.

Another interesting CMR technique for the
evaluation of myocardial global and local function is
myocardial tagging. Tagged CMR has been
established to track the motion of moving tissue by
using radiofrequency prepulses that generate gridlines
which are tagged onto the image. These taglines move
and are deformed as the heart contracts. Myocardial
tagging techniques have been used to quantify the
three-dimensional global and local deformation,
namely the strain patterns, of the RV in normal
subjects and open the way for studying alterations in
regional RV motion in various types of heart disease.6

In terms of assessment of PAH haemodynamics,
phase-shift velocity mapping is a useful CMR
approach (Figure 3). In patients with PAH, velocity-
encoded CMR provides measurements of pulmonary
flow and right-sided cardiac output, similar to those
obtained by means of thermodilution, and noninvasive
indexes for the assessment of pulmonary vascular
resistance, with good reproducibility.7 The curve of
pulmonary arterial flow rate as a function of time over
the cardiac cycle is used for the calculation of these
indexes, namely, the acceleration time (defined as the
time from the onset of flow to the peak velocity), the
acceleration volume (estimated by integrating the flow rate from the onset of flow to the peak velocity), the maximal change in flow rate during ejection (defined as the maximal value of the ascending slope of the flow rate) and the ratio of maximal change in flow rate to acceleration volume. Inverse correlations have been found between pulmonary vascular resistance and acceleration time or acceleration volume. Pulmonary vascular resistance is directly correlated (r=0.89) with the ratio of maximal change in flow rate to acceleration volume. This ratio can be used to distinguish patients with high pulmonary vascular resistance (≥67 mm Hg/min/L) from patients with near normal pulmonary vascular resistance or healthy subjects.

Another computed method which relies on a mathematical technique enables the noninvasive assessment of mean pulmonary arterial pressure from phase-shift velocity mapping by computing both physical and biophysical parameters.12 The physical parameters include the mean blood flow velocity over the cross-sectional area of the main pulmonary artery at the systolic peak and the maximal systolic value of the cross-sectional area of the main pulmonary artery (obtained by velocity-encoded CMR), whereas the biophysical parameters are related to each patient, such as height, weight, and heart rate. These parameters have been measured in patients undergoing right-side heart catheterization, and a significant correlation was found between the computed mean pulmonary arterial pressure value and the mean pressure value obtained from catheterization.

Pulmonary vascular and RV function often determine morbidity and mortality in patients with primary or persistent forms of secondary PAH and their precise monitoring is essential for optimal decision making. Therefore, CMR-derived anatomical and haemodynamic parameters could be helpful to screen patients with PAH to decide whether catheterization should be performed and for the follow-up of haemodynamic changes associated with medical therapies, such as long-term vasodilator treatment.2

One of the most significant advances in CMR has been the ability to directly visualize the non viable myocardium by using a segmented inversion-recovery gradient-echo sequence after the intravenous administration of gadolinium contrast. With this technique, termed delayed contrast-enhanced CMR, irreversibly damaged myocardium (fibrosis) is depicted as hyperenhanced (bright).13 Recently, it was shown that delayed contrast enhancement was present within the RV insertion points and interventricular septum of most patients with PAH.14 Septal contrast enhancement was associated with interventricular septal bowing. The extent of contrast enhancement correlated positively with RV end-diastolic volume/body surface area, RV mass, mean pulmonary arterial pressure and pulmonary vascular resistance and correlated inversely with RV ejection fraction. Delayed contrast-enhanced CMR may provide a novel marker for occult septal abnormalities directly relating to the haemodynamic stress experienced by patients with PAH. Given the correlations of contrast enhancement with existing markers of disease severity in PAH, this parameter may prove useful in the prognostic classification of these patients.

In terms of evaluation of the pulmonary circulation, gadolinium contrast-enhanced, three-dimensional magnetic resonance (MR) pulmonary angiography is a
promising modality for the identification of patients with PAH. A right pulmonary artery diameter value $>28$ mm is sensitive (89%) and highly specific (100%) for the diagnosis of chronic PAH.\textsuperscript{15} Especially in chronic thromboembolic PAH, MR angiography seems to have great potential in detection of vascular changes (central thromboembolic material, vessel cut-offs, and abnormal proximal-to-distal tapering) rather than in other causes of PAH\textsuperscript{4} (Figure 4). Although the combination of right heart catheterization and selective pulmonary digital subtraction angiography is still regarded as the standard of reference with respect to establishing the diagnosis, assessing the severity and determining the technical feasibility of thromboendarterectomy for chronic thromboembolic PAH, contrast-enhanced MR angiography depicts the characteristic angiographic findings in all patients, and its results show very good correlation with those of digital subtraction angiography. After surgery, MR angiography enables documentation of the procedural success and it may play (in combination with functional and flow measurements) an important role in postoperative follow-up.\textsuperscript{16}

In order to evaluate pulmonary perfusion, two approaches can be used.\textsuperscript{17} The first approach implements contrast-enhanced MR imaging techniques using two- or three-dimensional ultrafast imaging sequences. Multiple images are acquired rapidly during a bolus intravenous administration of a gadolinium–based contrast agent. Acquisition rates of up to 3 images per second have been used. Regions of decreased parenchymal blood flow will be identified as areas of poor regional contrast enhancement. The second approach to pulmonary perfusion imaging uses sequences that do not require intravenous contrast agents. These techniques are known as arterial spin labeling, and they use the protons within intravascular blood as an endogenous tracer for the evaluation of blood flow. While MR perfusion techniques are able to document changes in blood flow with pulmonary hypertension, they are not commonly used at present and their importance in the diagnosis and management of this disease is not known.

In terms of magnetic resonance imaging of the lung per se, this is inherently difficult due to the low proton density and the large number of soft tissue-air interfaces, both of which reduce the amount of emitted signal. However, advances in hardware design and imaging sequences have led to improved evaluation of the lung parenchyma.\textsuperscript{5}

Recent improvements in hardware and software have enabled cardiac catheterization under real-time CMR imaging (MR fluoroscopy). MR fluoroscopy allows the guidance of a balloon tipped catheter in the right atrium, the RV outflow tract and the main pulmonary artery. The balloon is inflated with carbon dioxide and produces a circumscribed susceptibility
the unique features of CMR render it ideal for the noninvasive monitoring of pulmonary vascular and RV function in PAH. Therefore, it can possibly play an important clinical role in guiding management and determining prognosis in this patient population. Nevertheless, additional experience is needed before introducing this tool in the routine assessment of pulmonary hypertension.

REFERENCES