Direct Transthoracic Access to the Left Ventricle for Catheter Ablation of Ventricular Tachycardia

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Background—Percutaneous approaches for radiofrequency ablation of ventricular tachycardia (VT) in the left ventricle are typically transarterial retro-aortic, antegrade transmural via an interatrial septal puncture, or epicardial. However, all 3 approaches may be contraindicated in certain cases. We describe 2 cases of VT ablation in which aortic and mitral valve replacements did not permit utilization of any of these techniques.

Methods and Results—Direct access to the left ventricular cavity was achieved with a percutaneous puncture through the intercostal space overlying the apex in the first case and through a left minithoracotomy in the second. A sheath was then inserted via the Seldinger technique, allowing catheter access for mapping and ablation of the VT. After successful ablation, the sheaths were withdrawn and hemostasis was achieved. A large left hemothorax occurred from the left ventricular apical puncture in the first case. Direct closure with a purse-string suture in the second case achieved hemostasis.

Conclusions—Direct percutaneous left ventricular puncture is a viable option for mapping and ablation of left ventricular VT. A minithoracotomy allows better hemostatic control. This technique has a role when other percutaneous approaches are contraindicated. (Circ Arrhythm Electrophysiol. 2010;3:178-185.)

Key Words: catheter ablation ■ tachyarrhythmias ■ electrophysiology

Percutaneous electrophysiological interventions in the left ventricle (LV) are usually performed through a transarterial retro-aortic approach or an antegrade transvenous approach via an interatrial septal puncture and then across the mitral valve. More recently, percutaneous pericardial access techniques have also been used. However, there are occasions when all 3 methods are not feasible. We report our experience with 2 such cases in which both aortic and mitral valve prostheses and obliteration of the pericardial space from previous cardiac surgery contraindicated all 3 approaches.

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We used direct transthoracic LV apical punctures for LV access and ablation. This technique was used in the past for diagnostic cardiac catheterization but was largely abandoned when simpler and safer techniques were developed.1

Case 1

This 65-year-old man had both aortic and mitral St Jude tilting disc replacements for rheumatic heart disease. His background cardiac history included a previous non–ST-elevation myocardial infarction, dilated cardiomyopathy (LV diastolic dimension, 79 mm; ejection fraction, 14%), dual-chamber automatic implantable cardioverter-defibrillator (ICD) implanted for clinical ventricular tachycardia (VT), and paroxysmal atrial fibrillation. Other medical history included pulmonary hypertension (74 mm Hg), obstructive sleep apnea, gastroesophageal reflux, chronic airways disease, and a distant stroke without current sequelae.

The patient presented with incessant VT with up to 30 conscious ICD discharges in a single day causing significant psychological distress. VT was refractory to antiarrhythmics including amiodarone and lidocaine, both of which appeared proarrhythmic, and to pace termination from his ICD. A trial of mexiletine decreased but did not prevent recurrences. There were at least 3 clinical VTs (Figure 1).

The patient agreed to an ablation procedure via direct LV puncture. Under general anesthesia, the apex was palpated. A 7-cm Cook needle was attached to pressure monitoring and was advanced through the overlying intercostal space toward the cavity of the LV until the pressure waveform indicated entry. A short J-tip guidewire was introduced and a standard 8F side arm vascular access sheath was then advanced into the LV cavity (Figure 2). Decapolar catheters were inserted into the coronary sinus and the right ventricular (RV) apex from femoral venous access sites. Full anticoagulation with heparin was started, aiming for an activated clotting time >300 seconds.

Biventricular voltage maps were created using the CARTO system and a D-curve irrigated tip Navistar Thermocool...
Figure 1. ECGs of VT. ECG 1, Right bundle-branch block morphology, right-axis deviation, and a cycle length of 440 ms. ECG 2, Right bundle-branch block morphology, normal axis, and cycle length of 460 ms. ECG 3, Left bundle-branch block pattern, right-axis deviation, and cycle length of 360 ms.
catheter (Johnson and Johnson, Pa). A low-voltage area consistent with scar was present in the inferobasal RV, but there were generally well-preserved electrograms in the LV. Substrate and channel mapping were therefore not useful. Fractionated double-potential electrograms were present in the anterobasal LV adjacent to the prosthetic valves. Sustained VT was readily induced with the first delivered single ventricular extrastimulus. VT had a left bundle-branch block (LBBB), right-axis deviation morphology with cycle length of 490 ms, and VA dissociation and was well tolerated. Mapping showed that the earliest activation, occurring 60 ms before the onset of the QRS, was in the anterobasal LV in close proximity to the prosthetic valves (Figure 3). Radiofrequency application here terminated VT in 4 seconds (maximum power, 50 W; maximum temperature, 48°C) (Figure 4). Further ablations were applied to the area. After the ablations were complete, a fast VT (cycle length, 310 ms) was inducible with 3 extrastimuli but was not hemodynamically stable and required external cardioversion. Because the troublesome slow clinical VT appeared successfully ablated and the LV end-diastolic pressure had risen from 30 mm Hg at the beginning of the procedure to 45 mm Hg, the procedure was terminated. The LV sheath was removed (total duration in situ, 2 hours) with a surgeon on standby, but good hemostasis appeared to have been achieved. The patient was observed closely, and a repeat transthoracic echocardiogram soon after...
the completion of the procedure did not reveal any pericardial fluid. In view of the poor LV function, double mechanical valves, and paroxysmal atrial fibrillation, heparin was not reversed.

Ninety minutes after the procedure, the patient deteriorated and became hypotensive. An urgent left thoracotomy was organized, but further compromise occurred during induction of anesthesia, requiring CPR for 20 minutes. Surgical exploration revealed bleeding from the LV apex to the left pleural cavity, with 2.5 L of blood present in the left pleural space. The pericardial space was confirmed to be obliterated by adhesions without any significant collection or clot. The LV puncture site was oversewn and a chest drain was inserted.

The patient made a remarkably quick recovery and was extubated the next day with no new hemodynamic or cerebrovascular sequelae. There were only rare short runs of VT in hospital. There were no episodes of sustained slow VT. Antitachycardia pacing terminated a single episode of faster VT on late follow-up at 4 months.

**Case 2**

A 66-year-old man presented with recurrent VT storms. His medical history included both aortic and mitral Starr-Edwards valves implanted in 1966 for rheumatic heart disease. The left circumflex artery probably was injured during the surgery, which led to chronic congestive cardiac failure related to poor LV systolic function. He also had development of chronic atrial fibrillation, atrioventricular heart block, and VT.

An ICD was implanted and subsequently upgraded to a biventricular device. The LV lead was implanted in a branch of the middle cardiac vein. Unfortunately, pacing from this site was proarrhythmic, and recurrent incessant VT with a morphology identical to pacing from the lead site developed. Multiple attempts to deactivate and reactivate the lead were not successful in suppressing the VT. A new LV pacing lead was implanted in a different LV vein, which led to improvement in his cardiac failure and reduction in episodes of VT.

Unfortunately, this improvement was short-lived, and frequent recurrences of VT and worsening congestive cardiac failure developed. There were at least 3 morphologies of VT, the most frequent of which had an RS pattern in V1 with left-axis deviation and a cycle length of 400 to 640 ms, suggesting a septal or paraseptal origin (Figure 5). The patient elected to proceed to an ablation procedure.

A decapolar catheter was placed in the coronary sinus and another in the RV apex from femoral venous approaches. A coronary angiogram was performed to demonstrate the coronary artery anatomy.

A short left submammary incision was made, and a rib retractor was used to improve exposure. The pericardial space was obliterated by postsurgical adhesions. Prolene purse strings were placed in the LV apex, and a short 8F sheath was inserted between them into the LV via the Seldinger technique. Full anticoagulation with heparin was started, aiming for an activated clotting time $>300$ seconds.

A contact substrate map in native paced rhythm was performed in both ventricles using the CARTO system with a D-curve CARTO Navistar Thermocool catheter. There were low-amplitude and fractionated signals with marked delayed potentials in the inferoapical LV wall and apex. This area was close to the tip of the original LV biventricular pacing lead (Figure 6).

VT was easily inducible with 2 extrastimuli and had a cycle length of 430 ms. It was poorly tolerated hemodynamically. Its LBBB left-axis deviation morphology was consistent with the first clinical VT morphology. Thereafter, the patient had spontaneous VT cycle length of 560 ms with LBBB left-axis deviation morphology that was well tolerated. Earliest activation in VT was in the inferoapical LV at the same site as the areas with delayed potentials (Figure 7).
Radiofrequency energy was applied to this area and terminated VT (maximum power, 50 W; maximum temperature, 50°C). This site and adjacent areas were ablated. Finally, the catheter was placed on the corresponding epicardial surface through the thoracotomy, but no local signals could be recorded.

After ablation of the clinical VT, a different, faster VT (cycle length, 310 ms) was inducible with 4 extrastimuli. There was no recordable blood pressure with this VT, and immediate cardioversion was required. This VT had a right bundle-branch block (RBBB), right-axis deviation morphology and intracardiac electrograms indicated origin in the basal septum. Because the clinically troublesome VT had been ablated and there was background poor LV function with multiple morphologies of VT, more ablation aiming to ablate all inducible VTs was not attempted.

Subsequent to the completion of the ablation, the catheter was removed and placed epicardially through the minithoracotomy. Access to all regions was difficult because of pericardial adhesions, but it was possible to manipulate the catheter to a portion of the epicardial LV surface. The local electrograms obtained were of poor quality.

The sheath was removed (total duration, 1.5 hours in situ) and hemostasis was achieved by tying the purse strings. An intercostal catheter was placed in the left pleural space via a separate stab incision and removed the next day without significant drainage. Intravenous unfractionated heparin was restarted 4 hours after the procedure.

The patient was discharged well 3 days later. He was free of VT over the next 3 months. Amiodarone was ceased. VT then recurred and amiodarone was restarted with no further recurrences for 2 months.

**Figure 5. Twelve-lead ECG of clinical VT.**
Discussion

Percutaneous direct LV puncture was used in the 1960s to 1980s for measuring gradients across stenosed aortic valves or valve prostheses. The rate of major complications was 3% to 8%, including ventricular arrhythmias, pneumothorax, hypotension, vasovagal symptoms, and accidental puncture of the lung, bronchus, RV, coronary arteries, or intercostal vessels. Walters et al described the Massachusetts General Hospital experience with 38 cases in which the overall complication rate was 8%, with 1 hemopericardium, 1 hemothorax requiring thoracotomy and decortication, and 1 episode of VF during the procedure. Importantly, there have been no documented cases of tamponade in patients with previous cardiac surgery.

A recent case report included 2 patients requiring direct measurement of LV pressure with aortic and mitral valve replacements. They reported no significant complications but stressed the importance of only using a 21-gauge needle for the puncture and a 4F catheter for ventriculography. However, in therapeutic cases, larger sheath sizes are often required. In another case series, 8 patients with a varying array of prosthetic valve combinations underwent direct percutaneous LV puncture for a variety of both diagnostic and therapeutic reasons. Their sheath sizes ranged from 4F to 9F. They found this technique especially helpful in approaching posteroseptally located, perivalvular mitral prosthetic leaks. They reported only a single adverse event, with a left-sided hemothorax developing several hours after the completion of the procedure in a patient with aortic and mitral prosthetic valves. They attributed the hemorrhage to trauma to an intercostal vessel and stressed the importance of positioning the needle immediately superior to the rib. In a case series of 22 patients with a previous Fontan repair, direct transthoracic puncture was used to access the pulmonary venous atrium. Two patients (9%) had a right hemothorax requiring thoracocentesis, probably related to hemorrhage from the right internal mammary artery.

Lim et al described the theoretical risk of direct hemorrhage from the LV apex, as in our first described case, as low.

![Figure 6](image1.png)

**Figure 6.** RAO (left) and LAO (right) views of the ablation catheter through the apical sheath. The tip is in an area of fractionation and delayed potentials and close to the old LV lead (arrow). The ablation catheter is withdrawn and flexed to reach the apex.

![Figure 7](image2.png)

**Figure 7.** RAO (left) and LAO (right) views of activation in the LV during VT. Earliest activation is in the inferoapical LV (red).
During LV systole, when the LV pressure is high, the myocardium is actively contracting and therefore should close the hole. During LV diastole, the LV pressure is low, thereby minimizing the risk of bleeding. This remains true as long as LV function is normal. Our patients had severe LV systolic dysfunction and markedly elevated diastolic pressure. By the same logic as above, LV dysfunction would promote bleeding. During systole, an akinetic apical region would not contract and could allow the free passage of blood, and during diastole the higher diastolic LV pressure would promote bleeding.

The other important consideration is the screening method for bleeding after the procedure. Braunwald in a series of 200 patients described only a single case of tamponade in a patient without previous cardiac surgery. We used transthoracic echocardiography as the major imaging investigation in this regard. However, in patients with obliterated pericardial spaces from previous cardiac surgery, it is probable that the bleeding will be directed toward the left pleural space, as in our case. We advocate close clinical observation and serial transthoracic echocardiography to image both the pericardial and the left pleural spaces to look for this complication.

There are 2 different techniques described for locating the puncture site. The first is direct palpation of the apex of the heart. The second is use of transthoracic echocardiography to confirm the location of the apex. It has been documented previously that the palpation method may be inaccurate and is usually more medial than the true apex, especially in patients with RV enlargement. A needle inserted here has a higher risk of RV trauma. A third option is a minithoracotomy to expose the LV apex. This allows for better hemostatic control with purse-string closure of the LV. This approach may be useful in patients at high risk of embolic events requiring early anticoagulation.

There has only been 1 reported case of RF ablation performed through direct LV puncture. This was done via a thoracotomy in a 10-month-old child with VT arising from the mitral valve region. The tip of the ablation catheter was advanced into the cavity if it falls out. The second issue is access to the LV apical endocardial surface. This requires looping back of the catheter tip from the LV cavity and partially withdrawing the access sheath to achieve good contact. Vigilance is required to prevent inadvertent removal of the sheath from the LV cavity. The catheter should be looped back with a U-bend initially, then the access sheath and catheter are withdrawn as a single unit until the tip of the ablation catheter contacts the endocardium. Variable flexion and extension of the ablation catheter then allows reasonable access to the LV apex and adjacent regions using this technique (Figure 6). Provided the ablation catheter remains in the LV cavity, the sheath can usually be readvanced into the cavity if it falls out.

Another tactic is to leave the tip of the sheath in the LV cavity but to advance the ablation catheter distally until it curves backward and then keep advancing until it reaches the apex. With this approach, care must be taken to ensure the ablation catheter does not become entrapped in the prosthetic valves (Figure 8). Neither technique adversely affected the quality of the local electrogram.

The use of a minithoracotomy did not cause significant movement of the heart relative to the reference catheter, and the CARTO registration remained accurate.

Another issue is concurrent epicardial access for mapping and ablation. Minithoracotomy allows peripapical pericardial adhesions to be surgically dissected and permits epicardial mapping and ablation of the exposed region. However, more extensive dissection of adhesions is not favorable because of poor exposure of the more remote ventricular surfaces and the potential risk of lacerating coronary vessels or grafts. Achieving hemostasis in that circumstance is likely to be difficult and might require conversion to a full sternotomy and institution of cardiac bypass.

**Conclusion**

We describe 2 cases in which direct percutaneous LV puncture, contact mapping, and catheter ablation were used effectively to treat incessant scar-related VT. Hemorrhage...
into the left pleural space occurred in the first case and was prevented in the second by using a minithoracotomy and purse-string ties to control bleeding from the LV puncture site. It is important to observe the patient closely after the procedure looking for bleeding into the left pleural space. This technique can have a useful role in catheter ablation when traditional access sites are precluded.

**Disclosures**

None.

**References**


**CLINICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Radiofrequency ablation is a recognized therapy for ventricular tachycardia, but it depends on access to either the endocardium or epicardium. However, in patients with combined mitral and aortic valve replacement, either approach may not be feasible. This report describes a novel approach in such patients with direct transthoracic access. Two methodologies are described: The first is a direct percutaneous puncture and the second uses a minithoracotomy.
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