

ERACEing the Risk of Cerebral Embolism From Atrial Fibrillation Ablation

David E. Haines, MD

Atrial fibrillation (AF) is the most common arrhythmia requiring treatment. The adverse outcomes commonly attributed to AF include symptomatic palpitations, dyspnea and exertional intolerance, and increased risk of thromboembolic complications, especially stroke. Because of the morbidity of this condition, several different treatment strategies have been derived to improve patient outcome. One of the strategies that are being used increasingly is catheter ablation. Presently, this is an aggressive, extensive ablation procedure designed to isolate triggering foci from electric conduction to the body of the atria and modifying atrial substrate to disrupt or prevent conduction/propagation of reentrant wave fronts. This procedure can be of long duration and associated with extensive myocardial destruction. Most of the ablation is performed in the systemic circulation. Because of these factors, systemic embolic events, especially stroke, have always been feared complications associated with this procedure.¹ Although the prevalence of stroke complications has been low, concern has been raised in recent years about the observation of asymptomatic cerebral embolism (ACE) on diffusion-weighted MRI.²⁻⁴

Article see p 835

ACE lesions after catheter ablation of AF were first reported by Lickfett et al⁵ and since have been described by several groups. The mechanisms leading to the formation of ACE lesions have not been completely elucidated but are presumed to be because of microembolism to the small terminal intracerebral arteries.¹ The components of the microembolic material causing ACE lesions after AF catheter ablation are hypothesized to be thrombus, gas microbubbles, heat-denatured albumin microbubbles, thermal coagulum, and avulsed tissue.⁶ Because this procedure does not involve catheter manipulation in the aortic root or aortic valve, dislodged calcium and cholesterol plaque probably do not have a role in ACE lesion production as is observed after transarterial valve replacement or carotid stenting. Certain catheter ablation technologies seemed to result in a higher rate of ACE lesions than others. In

particular, bipolar ablation through a circular multi-electrode radiofrequency ablation system has been shown to produce ACE lesions in as many as 39% of patients in observational trials.^{3,7} Therefore, it is an appealing hypothesis that techniques aimed at minimizing the risk of bubble, thrombus, and coagulum formation, especially with the multi-electrode radiofrequency catheter, might reduce the risk of ACE lesions seen after AF ablation.

In this issue of *Circulation: Arrhythmia and Electrophysiology*, Verma et al⁸ endeavored to determine whether the risk of ACE lesions could be mitigated by meticulous attention to specific details during the ablation procedure. First, the investigators hypothesized that thromboembolism because of inadequate anticoagulation could be the source of ACE lesions. Intracardiac thrombus as identified by intracardiac echocardiography can be reduced with more aggressive heparin anticoagulation, especially in patients who are prone to atrial thrombus formation such as those with marked atrial enlargement and spontaneous echocardiographic contrast. Maintaining an activated clotting time >300 seconds has been demonstrated to achieve this end.⁹ In addition, continuous anticoagulation with warfarin before, during, and after the procedure is associated with a trend toward lower risk of clinical stroke.¹⁰ After these observations, the investigators only performed procedures during therapeutic vitamin K antagonist therapy and maintained activated clotting time >350 seconds with intravenous heparin throughout the procedure. Second, air introduction into transeptal sheaths has long been recognized as a contributor to adverse neurological events during catheterization procedures.¹¹ It is routine practice among AF ablation operators to minimize catheter exchanges, maintain a pressurized flush of heparinized saline through the sheath, and when possible, withdraw the sheath into the right atrium during left atrial catheter manipulation. However, there has not been much attention paid to the initial introduction of the catheter through the hemostatic valve in the sheath. Therefore, the investigators' practice was to submerge the hub of the introducer sheath during loading of the catheter to prevent any air entry. Finally, coagulum formation is a consequence of excess radiofrequency power delivery to the ablation electrodes leading to boiling of the blood and denaturation of blood proteins, resulting in the formation of the friable material referred to as "coagulum." Ablation with the multi-electrode radiofrequency catheter has posed particular challenges because of a problem unique to the bipolar mode of energy delivery and the circular catheter design. Experimental and clinical studies have shown that when the catheter is constrained by pulmonary venous anatomy, inadvertent radiofrequency current shunting between overlapping proximal and distal electrodes can produce excess heating at that bipole and coagulum formation.^{6,12}

The opinions expressed in this article are not necessarily those of the editors or of the American Heart Association.

From the Department of Cardiovascular Medicine, Oakland University William Beaumont School of Medicine, Royal Oak, MI (D.E.H.); and Beaumont Health System, Royal Oak, MI (D.E.H.).

Correspondence to David E. Haines, MD, Department of Cardiovascular Medicine, Oakland University William Beaumont School of Medicine, Royal Oak, MI 48073. E-mail dhaines@beaumont.edu

(*Circ Arrhythm Electrophysiol.* 2013;6:827-829.)

© 2013 American Heart Association, Inc.

Circ Arrhythm Electrophysiol is available at
<http://circep.ahajournals.org>

DOI: 10.1161/CIRCEP.113.001025

To diminish this risk, the investigators inactivated the distal or proximal electrodes of the circular catheter (the electrodes that could potentially overlap) during bipolar energy delivery. With the above-procedural modifications, the ACE lesion prevalence post ablation was reduced to 1.7%, more than a 20-fold reduction in prevalence compared with published reports. The authors are to be congratulated for these superb outcomes, and their meticulous attention to detail should be an example for all of us to follow.

In addition offering strategies for reduction of ACE lesion prevalence post AF catheter ablation, this study highlighted the possible contribution of AF to the development of ACE lesions over time. Asymptomatic cerebral lesions on MRI scan are very common, reported in $\approx 20\%$ of healthy elderly subjects and 50% of patients with cardiovascular disease, hypertension, and diabetes mellitus.¹³ Factors that have been associated with a higher prevalence of these lesions include increasing age, female sex, a history of hypertension, diabetes mellitus, cardiovascular disease, migraine headaches, cigarette smoking, and AF¹³ although at least one large population-based study did not find that AF predicted silent brain infarction.¹⁴ When patients with nonvalvular AF were compared with age- and sex-matched controls, the prevalence of small (3–5 mm) and larger (>5 mm) asymptomatic cerebral lesions was significantly higher in the AF patients than in the controls (74.6% versus 57.7% for small and 49.3% versus 28.2% for larger lesions).¹⁵ Another study of patients selected from a cardiovascular prevention outpatient clinic described the prevalence of silent brain infarcts as 89% in patients with a history of paroxysmal AF, and 92% in patients with persistent AF, versus 46% in control patients with no AF history. A greater number of lesions per patients was seen in those with persistent versus paroxysmal AF.¹⁶

The authors of the present study observed that 60% of their patients had cerebral lesions detected by MRI on their baseline scans before any catheter procedure had been done. Theirs was a fairly healthy AF ablation population with a mean age of 60 ± 10 years, an 87% prevalence of paroxysmal AF, and a CHADS₂ score of 0.6 ± 0.7 . The prevalence of lesions on cerebral MRI pre-AF ablation in similar patients has been reported as 32% to 42%.^{4,17,18} The variance among studies may be attributed to varying definitions of silent brain infarcts, but these findings emphasize the fact that over time, AF takes its toll. ACE lesions or silent brain infarcts have been associated with worse cognitive performance on objective testing¹⁶ and greater cognitive decline later in life.^{13,19} In fact, it has been proposed that the terms “asymptomatic” and “silent” be replaced with the term “covert” because objective evidence of neurological injury can often be uncovered with objective testing in these “asymptomatic individuals.”¹⁹ Conversely, our treatment for this condition with catheter ablation is associated with new ACE lesions and acute cognitive decline.²⁰

As is often the case in medical science, we are now at a crossroads. We have good evidence that ongoing paroxysmal or persistent AF is associated with brain injury and reasonable pathophysiological mechanisms hypothesized to establish a reasonable likelihood of causality. We have a variety of therapeutic interventions including antiplatelet therapies, oral anticoagulants, suppressive antiarrhythmic drugs, left atrial

appendage occlusion/obliteration, and catheter ablation, all of which might allay some of the accumulating risk of brain injury in our patients with AF. At least one of those therapies (catheter ablation) has been shown to increase the risk of brain injury in the short run but offers the greatest promise to return patients to the natural history of patients who do not have this arrhythmia. The present study offers a road map to lessen that risk and thereby shift the risk–benefit analysis in favor of catheter ablation. But ultimately, there are no data to guide our way. So we move forward boldly, basing our clinical decisions on beliefs, not science. We all hope that someday we will enter a more enlightened age of AF management.

Disclosures

None.

References

1. Haeusler KG, Kirchhof P, Endres M. Left atrial catheter ablation and ischemic stroke. *Stroke*. 2012;43:265–270.
2. Gaita F, Caponi D, Pianelli M, Scaglione M, Toso E, Cesarani F, Boffano C, Gandini G, Valentini MC, De Ponti R, Halimi F, Leclercq JF. Radiofrequency catheter ablation of atrial fibrillation: a cause of silent thromboembolism? Magnetic resonance imaging assessment of cerebral thromboembolism in patients undergoing ablation of atrial fibrillation. *Circulation*. 2010;122:1667–1673.
3. Herrera Siklody C, Deneke T, Hocini M, Lehrmann H, Shin DI, Miyazaki S, Henschke S, Fluegel P, Schiebeling-Römer J, Bansmann PM, Bourdias T, Dousset V, Haïssaguerre M, Arentz T. Incidence of asymptomatic intracranial embolic events after pulmonary vein isolation: comparison of different atrial fibrillation ablation technologies in a multicenter study. *J Am Coll Cardiol*. 2011;58:681–688.
4. Deneke T, Shin DI, Balta O, Bünz K, Fassbender F, Mügge A, Anders H, Horlitz M, Päsler M, Karthikapallil S, Arentz T, Beyer D, Bansmann M. Postablation asymptomatic cerebral lesions: long-term follow-up using magnetic resonance imaging. *Heart Rhythm*. 2011;8:1705–1711.
5. Lickfett L, Hackenbroch M, Lewalter T, Selbach S, Schwab JO, Yang A, Balta O, Schrickel J, Bitzen A, Lüderitz B, Sommer T. Cerebral diffusion-weighted magnetic resonance imaging: a tool to monitor the thrombogenicity of left atrial catheter ablation. *J Cardiovasc Electrophysiol*. 2006;17:1–7.
6. Haines DE, Stewart MT, Dahlberg S, Barka ND, Condie C, Fiedler GR, Kirchhof NA, Halimi F, Deneke T. Microembolism and catheter ablation I: a comparison of irrigated radiofrequency and multielectrode-phased radiofrequency catheter ablation of pulmonary vein ostia. *Circ Arrhythm Electrophysiol*. 2013;6:16–22.
7. Gaita F, Leclercq JF, Schumacher B, Scaglione M, Toso E, Halimi F, Schade A, Froehner S, Ziegler V, Sergi D, Cesarani F, Blandino A. Incidence of silent cerebral thromboembolic lesions after atrial fibrillation ablation may change according to technology used: comparison of irrigated radiofrequency, multipolar nonirrigated catheter and cryoballoon. *J Cardiovasc Electrophysiol*. 2011;22:961–968.
8. Verma A, Debruyne P, Nardi S, Deneke T, DeGreef Y, Spitzer S, Balzer JO, Boersma L; on behalf of the ERACE Investigators. Evaluation and reduction of asymptomatic cerebral embolism in ablation of atrial fibrillation, but high prevalence of chronic silent infarction: results of the Evaluation of Reduction of Asymptomatic Cerebral Embolism trial. *Circ Arrhythm Electrophysiol*. 2013;6:835–842.
9. Ren JF, Marchlinski FE, Callans DJ, Gerstenfeld EP, Dixit S, Lin D, Nayak HM, Hsia HH. Increased intensity of anticoagulation may reduce risk of thrombus during atrial fibrillation ablation procedures in patients with spontaneous echo contrast. *J Cardiovasc Electrophysiol*. 2005;16:474–477.
10. Wazni OM, Beheiry S, Fahmy T, Barrett C, Hao S, Patel D, Di Biase L, Martin DO, Kanj M, Arruda M, Cummings J, Schweikert R, Saliba W, Natale A. Atrial fibrillation ablation in patients with therapeutic international normalized ratio: comparison of strategies of anticoagulation management in the periprocedural period. *Circulation*. 2007;116:2531–2534.
11. Mofrad P, Choucair W, Hulme P, Moore H. Case report: cerebral air embolization in the electrophysiology laboratory during transseptal catheterization: curative treatment of acute left hemiparesis with prompt hyperbaric oxygen therapy. *J Interv Card Electrophysiol*. 2006;16:105–109.

12. Wieczorek M, Lukat M, Hoeltgen R, Condie C, Hilje T, Missler U, Hirsch J, Scharf C. Investigation into causes of abnormal cerebral MRI findings following PVAC duty-cycled, phased RF ablation of atrial fibrillation. *J Cardiovasc Electrophysiol*. 2013;24:121–128.
13. Vermeer SE, Longstreth WT Jr, Koudstaal PJ. Silent brain infarcts: a systematic review. *Lancet Neurol*. 2007;6:611–619.
14. Price TR, Manolio TA, Kronmal RA, Kittner SJ, Yue NC, Robbins J, Anton-Culver H, O'Leary DH. Silent brain infarction on magnetic resonance imaging and neurological abnormalities in community-dwelling older adults. The Cardiovascular Health Study. CHS Collaborative Research Group. *Stroke*. 1997;28:1158–1164.
15. Kobayashi A, Iguchi M, Shimizu S, Uchiyama S. Silent cerebral infarcts and cerebral white matter lesions in patients with nonvalvular atrial fibrillation. *J Stroke.Cerebrovasc Dis*. 2012;21:310–317.
16. Gaita F, Corsinovi L, Anselmino M, Raimondo C, Pianelli M, Toso E, Bergamasco L, Boffano C, Consuelo Valentini M, Cesarani F, Scaglione M. Prevalence of silent cerebral ischemia in paroxysmal and persistent atrial fibrillation and correlation with cognitive function. *J Am Coll Cardiol*. 2013 Jun 29. pii: S0735-1097(13)02550-3. doi:10.1016/j.jacc.2013.05.074. [Epub ahead of print].
17. Martinek M, Sigmund E, Lemes C, Derndorfer M, Aichinger J, Winter S, Jauker W, Gschwendtner M, Nesser HJ, Pürerfellner H. Asymptomatic cerebral lesions during pulmonary vein isolation under uninterrupted oral anticoagulation. *Europace*. 2013;15:325–331.
18. Hara M, Ooie T, Yufu K, Tsunematsu Y, Kusakabe T, Ooga M, Saikawa T, Sakata T. Silent cortical strokes associated with atrial fibrillation. *Clin Cardiol*. 1995;18:573–574.
19. Vermeer SE, Prins ND, den Heijer T, Hofman A, Koudstaal PJ, Breteler MM. Silent brain infarcts and the risk of dementia and cognitive decline. *N Engl J Med*. 2003;348:1215–1222.
20. Schwarz N, Kuniss M, Nedelmann M, Kaps M, Bachmann G, Neumann T, Pitschner HF, Gerriets T. Neuropsychological decline after catheter ablation of atrial fibrillation. *Heart Rhythm*. 2010;7:1761–1767.

KEY WORDS: Editorials ■ atrial fibrillation ■ catheter ablation ■ mild cognitive impairment ■ stroke

ERACEing the Risk of Cerebral Embolism From Atrial Fibrillation Ablation

David E. Haines

Circ Arrhythm Electrophysiol. 2013;6:827-829

doi: 10.1161/CIRCEP.113.001025

Circulation: Arrhythmia and Electrophysiology is published by the American Heart Association, 7272 Greenville Avenue, Dallas, TX 75231

Copyright © 2013 American Heart Association, Inc. All rights reserved.

Print ISSN: 1941-3149. Online ISSN: 1941-3084

The online version of this article, along with updated information and services, is located on the World Wide Web at:

<http://circep.ahajournals.org/content/6/5/827>

Permissions: Requests for permissions to reproduce figures, tables, or portions of articles originally published in *Circulation: Arrhythmia and Electrophysiology* can be obtained via RightsLink, a service of the Copyright Clearance Center, not the Editorial Office. Once the online version of the published article for which permission is being requested is located, click Request Permissions in the middle column of the Web page under Services. Further information about this process is available in the [Permissions and Rights Question and Answer](#) document.

Reprints: Information about reprints can be found online at:
<http://www.lww.com/reprints>

Subscriptions: Information about subscribing to *Circulation: Arrhythmia and Electrophysiology* is online at:
<http://circep.ahajournals.org/subscriptions/>