Early open mitral valve surgery following arterial embolism

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A report is presented of nine patients who underwent early open mitral valve surgery after arterial embolism had occurred. Five of these patients had an early second arterial embolism before their mitral operation, an observation which stresses the risk inherent in delay of mitral valve surgery. The demonstration of atrial thrombus in four illustrates the potential danger of closed valvotomy techniques in such cases. Advanced pathological changes and severe stenosis of the mitral valve were found in all nine patients; valve replacement had to be done in three. All nine patients are alive and well after follow-up from 6 to 42 months. No further thromboembolic events have occurred after mitral valve surgery.

Peripheral arterial embolism is a common complication of mitral stenosis and is accepted by many as an indication for mitral commissurotomy (Glenn, Calabrese, Goodyear, Hume, and Stansel, 1969; Olesen and Baden, 1961). However, there is considerable dispute regarding the timing of the operation. Some authors (Ellis, Abelmann, and Harken, 1957; Glenn and McNeill, 1957) have recommended early cardiac surgery, whereas others take a more conservative approach (Taber and Lam, 1960; Kellogg, Liu, Fishman, and Larson, 1961; Szekely, 1964). Furthermore, the eventual surgical intervention may still be carried out using a 'closed' valvotomy technique (Glenn et al., 1969; Deverall, Olley, Smith, Watson, and Whitaker, 1968).

We believe that delay of intervention and the use of 'closed' techniques are ill advised and even hazardous. Our experience, described below, leads us to recommend early, direct vision mitral valve surgery as soon as feasible after the embolic event.

MATERIAL (Table)

Nine patients have undergone 'open' mitral valve surgery following arterial embolism during the last three and a half years. Seven women and two men are included in this group. Their ages range from 19 to 60 years. Except for the two youngest, all had atrial fibrillation at the time of the embolic episodes. Six patients were without cardiac symptoms and mitral valve disease was not even suspected in four of them, the only call to medical attention being the acute arterial obstruction. One patient experienced three episodes of peripheral embolism before the diagnosis of mitral disease was proved. Two others suffered two embolic events before diagnosis of the mitral stenosis. In two patients the diagnosis was made at the time of the first arterial embolism, but they had another embolic event while awaiting cardiac surgery. Seven embolectomies were performed in five patients as the initial therapy (two patients had recurrent emboli necessitating repeat embolectomy).

All the peripheral embolectomies in this series were successful in restoring circulation to the affected limbs. Three patients had central retinal embolii and two suffered from cerebral emboli, one remaining with residual hemiplegia and speech difficulties. The shortest time elapsing between the patient's last embolism and the intracardiac surgery was four days and the longest time interval was two months. The main reason for the delay in some of these cases was the patient's hesitation to agree to an early heart operation. However, no patient refused mitral valve surgery subsequent to a second arterial embolism. In one patient, who was asymptomatic before the embolism, mitral valve surgery had to be postponed for 34 days due to the onset of subacute bacterial endocarditis and later pulmonary oedema. Six patients underwent mitral valve surgery within three weeks of the embolic episode and during the same hospital stay.

A tenth patient should be included in this group: a 45-year-old quarry labourer was successfully operated on for aortic saddle embolus. Mitral stenosis and atrial fibrillation were discovered for the first time. Ten days after the embolectomy right heart catheterization revealed severe pulmonary hypertension (85/40 mm. Hg) and a markedly raised capillary mean pressure (40 mm. Hg). While awaiting
his turn for 'open' heart surgery in the hospital he
died suddenly, four days after the catheterization.
No necropsy permission was granted but the very
sudden death is most suggestive of coronary
embolism.

**TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

All patients were operated on with extracorporeal
circulation maintained by the Rygg-Kyvsgaard
disposable bubble oxygenator. The priming solution
was reconstituted ACD blood and Ringer's lactate.
Moderate hypothermia to 30° C. was used. .

The heart was approached via a midline sternotomy
incision and was very carefully manipulated,
special care being taken to avoid contact with the
left atrium and its appendage before bypass. After
opening the left atrium in the interatrial groove, its
interior and the appendage were explored and
thrombi were completely removed when present.
Only after ligation of the appendage at its base and
repeat examination of the left atrial cavity for free
clots was attention turned to the mitral valve and
the appropriate surgery carried out.

**INTRA-OPERATIVE FINDINGS AND RESULTS**

The left atrial appendage was found to contain both
free and adherent thrombi in four patients. All nine
patients had 'pure' mitral stenosis; the largest orifice
had a maximum diameter of 12 mm. and the smallest
6 mm. In seven patients the stenosis was recorded
as severe with maximum orifice diameter less than
10 mm. An initial attempt at commissurotomy was
made in all cases and was successful in six. In three
patients the functional result of the valvotomy was
considered to be unsatisfactory and the mitral valve
was replaced with a Kay-Shiley disc prosthesis.

No mortality occurred in this series. None of these
patients showed evidence of intra-operative or post-
operative arterial embolism during a follow-up period
ranging from six months to three and a half years.
All patients have returned to their former employ-
ment and even those who denied pre-operative
heart symptoms admitted to improvement in their
condition following heart surgery.

**COMMENT**

Closed mitral valvotomy is considered by many as
the operation of choice in selected cases of iso-
lated pure mitral stenosis with no evidence of valve
calcification. However, in our opinion, in the
presence of recent arterial embolism the use of the
open-heart technique is essential in order to
prevent the mishap of intra-operative arterial
embolism due to dislodgement of atrial or valvu-
lar thrombus. Before the introduction of extra-
corporeal circulation, we personally witnessed
intra-operative aortic saddle embolism in three
patients, and this unfortunate experience has been
shared by others. Ellis and Harken (1961) found
that 32 out of 260 patients who gave a history of
pre-operative arterial embolism suffered an

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**TABLE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Rhythm</th>
<th>Site of Embolus</th>
<th>Interval to Cardiac Surgery</th>
<th>Operative Findings</th>
<th>Operative Procedure</th>
<th>Follow-up</th>
<th>Post-op. Embolus</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Sinus</td>
<td>R. central Retinal</td>
<td>38 days</td>
<td>Mitral stenosis Valvar orifice 10 mm.</td>
<td>Mitral valve replacement</td>
<td>38 months</td>
<td>Alive and well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>A.F.</td>
<td>Bilat. femoral R. femoral</td>
<td>10 days</td>
<td>Mitral stenosis Valvar orifice 8 mm.</td>
<td>Valvotomy</td>
<td>27 months</td>
<td>Alive and well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Sinus</td>
<td>L. Retinal</td>
<td>60 days</td>
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<td>Valvotomy</td>
<td>12 months</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
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<td>50</td>
<td>A.F.</td>
<td>Aortic bifurcation (saddle)</td>
<td>60 days</td>
<td>Mitral stenosis Valvar orifice 8–10 mm.</td>
<td>Valvotomy</td>
<td>11 months</td>
<td>Alive and well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>A.F.</td>
<td>R. brachial R. brachial</td>
<td>60 days</td>
<td>Mitral stenosis Valvar orifice 10 mm.</td>
<td>Mitral valve replacement</td>
<td>9 months</td>
<td>Alive and well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>A.F.</td>
<td>Cerebral</td>
<td>4 months</td>
<td>Mitral stenosis Valvar orifice 8 mm.</td>
<td>Mitral valve replacement</td>
<td>9 months</td>
<td>Alive and well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>A.F.</td>
<td>R. femoral L. femoral R. central retinal</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>Mitral stenosis Valvar orifice 12 mm.</td>
<td>Valvotomy</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>Alive and well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>A.F.</td>
<td>Aortic bifurcation (saddle)</td>
<td>17 days</td>
<td>Mitral stenosis Valvar orifice 6 mm.</td>
<td>Valvotomy</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>Alive and well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>A.F.</td>
<td>R. femoral</td>
<td>10 days</td>
<td>Mitral stenosis Valvar orifice 8 mm.</td>
<td>Valvotomy</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>Alive and well</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A.F. = Atrial fibrillation
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intra-operative embolism. Deverall et al. (1968) reported systemic embolism as the cause of intra-operative death in 9 patients out of a series of 298 mitral valvotomies. Four out of the nine patients in our series were found to have thrombus in the atrial cavity and/or the appendage at the time of surgery. Closed commissurotomy may have resulted in a catastrophe. In order to minimize handling of the left atrium and its appendage it is recommended that the surgical approach be via a midline sternotomy or a right thoracotomy which also enables thorough inspection of the left atrial cavity.

Our experience suggests that the occurrence of peripheral arterial embolism is an indication of advanced mitral valve pathology even in patients without cardiac complaints.

The operative findings in every patient proved to be tight mitral stenosis. Furthermore, in one patient who had been asymptomatic till unilateral blindness due to a central retinal arterial embolus occurred, the onset of pulmonary oedema the night before scheduled surgery is evidence of the severity of the mitral stenosis. The very fact that valve replacement was necessary in three patients stresses the far advanced pathological changes of the mitral valve.

Five of the nine patients had recurrent emboli shortly before intracardiac surgery, whereas another patient succumbed to his second arterial embolism a few days before scheduled surgery. According to Jacobs (1959), arterial embolism was fatal in 18% of the patients suffering from mitral stenosis, and in another 5% arterial embolism was found to be contributory to death. Glenn et al. (1969) found that 31.8% of their fatalities were attributable to systemic embolus. Furthermore, Darling, Austen, and Linton (1967) found the incidence of recurrent emboli in rheumatic heart disease to be 56.2%. Therefore, every effort should be made to proceed with early open-heart surgery during the patient's hospitalization for the first embolus. The only possible exception to this rule is the patient with massive hemiplegia following cerebral embolism.

Our reluctance to delay surgery in cases of arterial embolism due to clinically proven isolated pure mitral stenosis would prompt us to operate without cardiac catheterization if this examination involves unjustifiable procrastination.

In this series anticoagulant therapy was only used following mitral valve replacement. None of the patients suffered post-operative embolization, despite recurrent embolic episodes, in the majority, prior to the mitral valve surgery.

REFERENCES


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