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Citation for published version:

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.1097/SLA.0b013e3181e40dde

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Early version, also known as pre-print

Published In:
Annals of Surgery

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Randomized Controlled Trial of Dual Antiplatelet Therapy in Patients Undergoing Surgery for Critical Limb Ischemia

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METHODS

Subjects

Patients with critical limb ischemia who were scheduled for infrainguinal bypass, femoral endarterectomy or lower limb amputation under general anesthesia were recruited into the study. Critical limb ischemia was defined as the presence of rest pain or skin breakdown, resulting from arterial disease. Exclusion criteria included women of child bearing potential, nonatherosclerotic vascular disease, sudden acute limb ischemia requiring emergency surgery, supra-inguinal or aortic surgery, history of acute coronary syndrome within 3 months, history of peptic ulcer disease, previous or current intracranial hemorrhage, bleeding diathesis, uncontrolled hypertension, or thrombocytopenia, planned epidural or spinal anesthesia, hypersensitivity or allergy to thienopyridines, and current warfarin or thienopyridine use.

Study Design

Patients were recruited between June 2005 and February 2008, and gave written informed consent prior to study participation. The study was approved by the local Research Ethics Committee, given Clinical Trial Authorization by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (United Kingdom), and was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and CONSORT guidelines.

This was a prospective single center double-blind randomized controlled trial at a tertiary referral vascular surgical unit in the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, South-East Scotland, United Kingdom.

Treatment Allocation

Following recruitment, clopidogrel and matched placebo were assigned in identical packs by the pharmacy trials unit through allocation of sequentially numbered study medication packs that had been randomized using an independent computer-generated sequence. Patients received 600 mg of clopidogrel or matched placebo 4 to 28 hours prior to surgery and received 75 mg of clopidogrel or matched placebo daily for 3 days after surgery (Studies suggest that the incidence of peri-operative adverse cardiovascular events is greatest within the first 5 days of surgery. We therefore commenced therapy preoperatively and continued maintenance levels into a short postoperative period.). Patients undergoing bypass procedures received a single dose of 5000 IU of intravenous unfractionated heparin during surgery before arterial clamping. At the discretion of the clinical team, intravenous protamine was given only if excessive bleeding was felt to be present at the end of the operation. All patients received subcutaneous unfractionated heparin 5000 IU twice daily in the postoperative period and were maintained on aspirin (75 mg daily) throughout the study.

Biomarkers of Atherothrombosis

Platelet Activation and Inflammatory Markers

Blood samples were taken before, and a minimum of 4 hours after, a loading dose of 600 mg of clopidogrel or matched placebo, immediately after the operation in the recovery room, and on day 1 after surgery. Flow cytometric measurements of platelet-monocyte aggregates and platelet surface expression of P-selectin were used as markers of in vivo platelet activation as described previously. Directly conjugated monoclonal antibodies were obtained from DakoCytomation (Cambridge, United Kingdom) and Serotec (Oxford, United Kingdom).

Myocardial Injury

The Reference Clinical Biochemistry Laboratory measured plasma troponin I concentrations using the ARCHITECT Troponin I STIAI assay (Abbott Diagnostics, Maidenhead, United Kingdom) using an autoanalyzer. This has an analytical sensitivity of 0.009 ng/mL and a functional sensitivity of 0.032 ng/mL with a coefficient of variation of <10%. The latter threshold was employed for the clinical case definition of myocardial infarction (see below).

In-Patient Clinical Outcomes

Acute Coronary Syndromes

Clinical symptoms, plasma troponin concentrations and electrocardiograms were recorded daily from the preoperative day until day 3 postsurgery. A blinded independent cardiologist reviewed all clinical data and applied the universal definition of myocardial infarction.23

Bleeding Complications

Bleeding events were defined as major (life-threatening or nonlife threatening) and minor according to CURE criteria. Postoperative blood transfusions were recommended according to Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network (SIGN) criteria. Intraoperative blood loss, postoperative fall in hemoglobin, blood product transfusion, length of operation and length of hospital stay were recorded. Incidence of gastro-intestinal bleeding, persistent (>3 days) wound leak, hematoma, or infection were documented.

Data and Statistical Analysis

An independent data monitoring committee performed an interim safety analysis of bleeding outcomes following recruitment of 50 patients and recommended continuation of the trial to completion. Following completion of trial recruitment, data collection, and laboratory analyses, the data base was locked, treatment allocation unblinded and prespecified analyses performed. The primary end-point was platelet-monocyte aggregation. The sample size (n = 50 per group) was based on our previous studies and gave an 80% power of detecting a 4.8% difference in platelet-monocyte aggregates at a significance level of 5%. Secondary outcomes included plasma troponin concentration, and rate of myocardial infarction and bleeding complications. Continuous variables are reported as mean ± SD. Analysis of variance with repeated measures, 2-tailed Student t test and χ2 analysis were performed as appropriate using GraphPad Prism Version 4 (La Jolla, US). Statistical significance was taken as a 2-sided P value <0.05.

Statement of Responsibility

The authors had full access to the data and take responsibility for its integrity. All authors have read and agree to the manuscript as written.

RESULTS

Of the 159 potentially eligible patients, 113 were randomized to trial medication (Fig. 1). Of those who completed the study protocol, 58 received placebo and 50 received clopidogrel. There was no difference in baseline demographics between the 2 groups (Table 1; Appendix 1, Supplemental Digital Content 1, online only, available at: http://links.lww.com/SLA/A53).

Biomarkers of Atherothrombosis

Platelet Activation

In keeping with the patient population, baseline levels of platelet-monocyte aggregation were markedly elevated. There was no difference in baseline platelet-monocyte aggregates (P = 0.80) and P-selectin expression (P = 0.80) between the 2 groups. Platelet activation was unaffected by placebo (P = 0.78) but clopidogrel (600 mg) caused a rapid reduction in platelet-monocyte aggregates (38% ± 17%–30% ± 17%, P = 0.007) and platelet P-selectin expression (4.9% ± 2.7%–2.8% ± 1.6%, P < 0.0001). In both
groups, platelet activation declined within 24 hours of surgery \( (P \leq 0.005) \), but clopidogrel treatment was associated with greater reductions throughout the immediate postoperative period \( (P = 0.0019; \text{Fig. 2}) \). To assess pharmacological efficacy of the trial intervention, ex vivo platelet aggregation to 5 \mu M \text{ adenosine diphosphate} was performed in a subgroup of trial participants \( (n = 10 \text{ per group}) \). This confirmed that clopidogrel inhibited adenosine diphosphate-induced aggregation \( (59\% \pm 20\%–33\% \pm 18\%, P < 0.0001) \) throughout the peri-operative period \( (P = 0.0015; \text{data not shown}) \).

Myocardial Injury

Of the 108 trial subjects, 18 \( (16.7\%) \) suffered an elevated plasma troponin concentration \( (\geq 0.032 \text{ ng/mL}) \): 8 \( (16.0\%) \) received clopidogrel and 10 \( (17.2\%) \) placebo \( (\text{relative risk [RR]} 0.93, 95\% \text{ confidence intervals [CI]} 0.40–2.17; P = 0.86) \). Nine \( (8.3\%) \) patients \( (4 \text{ clopidogrel and 5 placebo}) \) had an elevation of plasma troponin concentration before surgery, and 9 patients \( (4 \text{ clopidogrel and 5 placebo}) \) suffered a postoperative rise in troponin. Of those 9

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**TABLE 1. Baseline Characteristics of Patients According to Interventional Group**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Clopidogrel</th>
<th>Placebo</th>
<th>( P )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>n = 50</td>
<td>n = 58</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (yr)</td>
<td>68 ± 2</td>
<td>68 ± 2</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male sex</td>
<td>39 (78)</td>
<td>45 (78)</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical limb ischemia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ankle-brachial pressure index &lt;0.2</td>
<td>34 (68)</td>
<td>31 (53)</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skin changes (ulcer/gangrene)</td>
<td>27 (54)</td>
<td>34 (59)</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest pain</td>
<td>42 (84)</td>
<td>49 (84)</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bypass</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amputation</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined bypass and angioplasty</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lees revised cardiac risk index ( \geq 3^{25} )</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardiac risk factors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes mellitus</td>
<td>19 (38)</td>
<td>19 (33)</td>
<td>0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypertension</td>
<td>41 (82)</td>
<td>48 (83)</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypercholesterolemia</td>
<td>31 (62)</td>
<td>37 (64)</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family history of ischemic heart disease</td>
<td>5 (11)</td>
<td>8 (14)</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current smoker</td>
<td>20 (40)</td>
<td>31 (53)</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serum creatinine (\mu mol/L)</td>
<td>98 ± 4</td>
<td>106 ± 6</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ischemic heart disease</td>
<td>20 (40)</td>
<td>31 (56)</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cerebrovascular disease</td>
<td>11 (22)</td>
<td>15 (26)</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspirin</td>
<td>50 (100)</td>
<td>58 (100)</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statin</td>
<td>35 (70)</td>
<td>45 (78)</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beta-blockade</td>
<td>13 (26)</td>
<td>12 (21)</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibition</td>
<td>19 (38)</td>
<td>24 (41)</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Variables reported as mean ± SD or n (%) and analyzed with unpaired \( t \) test or \( \chi^2 \) analysis as appropriate.
patients who sustained a preoperative troponin rise, plasma troponin concentrations fell with clopidogrel therapy but remained unchanged or increased in those on placebo (Fig. 3). Patients with postoperative elevation in plasma troponin concentrations had greater platelet-monocyte aggregates (40% vs. 30%; P = 0.033).

Clinical Outcomes

Of the 108 trial participants, 7 patients (6.5%) sustained an acute myocardial infarction: 3 (6.0%) in the clopidogrel group and 4 (6.9%) in the placebo group (RR: 0.87, 95% CI: 0.20–3.7, P = 0.85). There were no in-patient deaths, intracranial hemorrhages or incidences of inotrope use. There was no difference in life-threatening major bleeding between treatment groups (7 [14%] clopidogrel and 6 [10%] placebo; RR: 1.35, 95% CI: 0.49–3.76; P = 0.56), although those who received clopidogrel had an increased risk of major nonlife-threatening bleeding (11 [22%] clopidogrel and 4 [7%] placebo; RR: 3.19, 95% CI: 1.1–9.4; P = 0.024; Fig. 4). Twenty (40%) patients receiving clopidogrel underwent red-cell transfusion compared with only 8 (14%) on placebo (P = 0.0019). Restricting analyses to transfusions administered in accordance with the SIGN guidelines, there remained an increased transfusion rate in the clopidogrel group (14 [28%] clopidogrel and 7 [12%] placebo; RR: 2.32, 95% CI: 1.02–5.29; P = 0.037). There was no difference in minor bleeding between the 2 groups (17 [34%] clopidogrel and 12 [21%] placebo; RR: 1.64, 95% CI: 0.87–3.10; P = 0.12). Five patients suffered gastrointestinal bleeding (hematemesis or melaena); 4 of whom were receiving placebo. Two patients received intraoperative protamine—1 in each intervention arm.

There were 2 reoperations for bleeding in the placebo group and 1 in the clopidogrel group. Although there was an increase in wound leak in those patients who received clopidogrel (13 [26%] vs. 3 [5%]; RR: 5.03, 95% CI: 1.52–16.6; P = 0.0024), there was no difference in incidence of wound infection at 3 months (P = 0.80). Clopidogrel therapy did not increase the length of operation (P = 0.60) or hospital stay (P = 0.72). Subgroup analysis of patients undergoing revascularization compared with amputation revealed no significant differences in clopidogrel versus placebo in terms of perioperative adverse cardiovascular events or bleeding outcomes (major life threatening, major nonlife threatening or minor). There were no incidences of early graft failure in either group.

DISCUSSION

We have conducted the first double-blind randomized controlled trial of perioperative dual antiplatelet therapy in patients undergoing surgery for critical limb ischemia. We demonstrate improvements in biomarkers of platelet activation and myocardial injury without causing unacceptable bleeding complications. These data form the first objective assessment of the risks and benefits of perioperative dual antiplatelet therapy in patients undergoing high-risk vascular procedures.

Peripheral arterial disease affects nearly 30 million people in Western Europe and North America. In up to 3-quarters of cases, patients have coexistent coronary artery disease and a 3-fold increased risk of cardiovascular events and death.26 In a recent large
for the investigation of perioperative intensive antiplatelet regimes, cardiovascular events, bleeding concerns are a major disincentive.

Platelet activation (Fig. 2) that are associated with increased clinical risk as well as the progression of atherothrombosis.

Although clopidogrel did not have an overall effect on the number of peri-operative troponin-positive events (8 clopidogrel vs. 10 placebo; P = 0.86), half of the troponin elevations occurred preoperatively and prior to the administration of the study medication.

Subsequent institution of clopidogrel therapy was associated with a marked reduction in troponin concentrations (Fig. 3). However, we readily acknowledge that our study was not primarily powered to assess cardiac troponin and clinical outcomes and whether these improvements in surrogate biomarkers translate into clinical benefit remains to be established.

All therapies have potential benefits and risks, and it is inevitable that antiplatelet therapies will be associated with increased bleeding complications. Although it may be regarded as potentially reversible, the importance of major bleeding must not be underestimated as it remains an independent predictor of adverse clinical outcome.

Although vascular patients are at high risk of cardiovascular events, bleeding concerns are a major disincetive for the investigation of perioperative intensive antiplatelet regimes, and perhaps underlie the paucity of such data. Most published reports are observational, although randomized-controlled trials of dual antiplatelet therapy have been performed in patients undergoing carotid endarterectomy and peripheral angioplasty, and report no major increase in bleeding complications. However, there have been no randomized-controlled trials of dual antiplatelet therapy in surgery for critical limb ischemia, where the potential for both perioperative bleeding and cardiac complications is greater. We have successfully delivered such a trial and confirmed that while bleeding is increased, there was no excess of life-threatening bleeds, reoperations, or wound infections. Our results are consistent those reported by the CURE trial, where those patients who continued clopidogrel therapy within 5 days of coronary artery bypass had a 2-fold increased relative risk of major bleeding. Arguably our pilot study suggests that the bleeding risks of dual antiplatelet therapy in the peri-operative period are modest, and perhaps often over estimated.

Increasingly patients are undergoing surgery for critical limb ischemia with a recent history of a cerebrovascular event, acute coronary syndrome, or percutaneous coronary intervention, and will be receiving intensive antiplatelet regimes. Their perioperative management must protect them from both coexisting pathology as well as the associated risks of surgery. Our study has shown that it is feasible to perform vascular surgery for critical limb ischemia, under dual antiplatelet therapy with an acceptable bleeding profile. Although the absolute clinical benefits of such a regimen need to be validated in a large-scale clinical trial, we believe that our study provides evidence for the beneficial role of perioperative antiplatelet agents in protecting these patients against cardiovascular complications.

Patients receiving epidural or spinal anesthesia were not recruited into the study due to the theoretical risk of epidural hematoma. We are aware that many vascular units aim for epidural or spinal anesthesia, thus precluding many patients from perioperative antiplatelet therapy. However, there is currently no level-one evidence for superior cardiovascular outcome with neuraxial blockade compared with general anesthesia. The main benefit lies in reducing respiratory complications associated with abdominal surgery. Although many of the patients who were recruited smoked, none had significant chronic obstructive airway disease (based on lung function testing) and none were undergoing abdominal or emergency surgery. Use of both trial medication and general anesthesia was therefore deemed appropriate.

Persistent platelet reactivity despite antiplatelet therapy has been proposed as a risk factor for the recurrence of ischemic events following PCI. Recent mechanistic and clinical data suggest that higher loading and maintenance doses of clopidogrel may achieve a more rapid and greater degree of platelet inhibition that translates into improved clinical outcomes, but this is yet to be formally evaluated in an adequately powered randomized trial. We administered a relatively high preoperative loading dose of clopidogrel (600 mg) to ensure efficacy of the intervention during surgery. It was hypothesized that if additional perioperative antiplatelet therapy was to be of any therapeutic advantage then this should be demonstrated with the largest degree of platelet inhibition. Previous studies have reported increased platelet activation and cardiovascular events occurring within the first 5 days following surgery. We therefore rationalized that clopidogrel therapy would be of most benefit when given preoperatively and continued in the immediate postoperative period. It is possible that we could still achieve atherothrombotic protection with reduced bleeding complications by administering lower doses of clopidogrel and this requires further clarification. However, given the relatively high incidence of troponin-positive events before surgery, we would recommend initiation of therapy prior to surgery.

In conclusion, we have demonstrated that perioperative dual antiplatelet therapy has beneficial effects on reducing biomarkers of atherothrombosis without increasing life-threatening bleeds in patients with critical limb ischemia. We propose that large-scale randomized controlled trials are needed to establish whether dual
antiplatelet therapy can improve clinical outcomes in high-risk patients undergoing vascular surgery.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank all the clinical staff of the vascular unit, and in particular, Mr. R. T. A. Chalmers, Mr. S. C. A. Fraser, and Mr. Z. Raza; the Wellcome Trust Clinical Research Facility and the Clinical Biochemistry and Hematology Departments of the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh.

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