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Angiotensin II Receptor mRNA Expression and Vasoconstriction in Human Coronary Arteries: Effects of Heart Failure and Age

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Abstract: Angiotensin II is a potent vasoconstrictor that is implicated in the pathogenesis of hypertension, heart failure and atherosclerosis. In the present study, angiotensin II receptor mRNA expression levels were quantified by real-time polymerase chain reaction and the vasocontractile responses to angiotensin II were characterised by in vitro pharmacology in endothelium-denuded human coronary arteries. Angiotensin II type 1 (AT1) and type 2 (AT2) receptor mRNA expression levels were significantly down-regulated in arteries from patients with heart failure as compared to controls. The angiotensin II-induced vasoconstriction diminished with increasing age in patients with heart failure (r² = 0.31, P < 0.05). Also, the AT1 receptor mRNA expression levels decreased with increasing age in patients with heart failure (r² = 0.74, P < 0.05), while no such correlation could be shown in the control group (r² = 0.04, P = n.s.). The AT2 receptor mRNA expression levels did not correlate with age in patients with heart failure or controls. In conclusion, the diminished angiotensin II vasoconstriction with age in heart failure patients is most likely due to a lower density of AT1 receptors and may result from a longer period of exposure to heart failure in older patients.

Limitations of the study

The supply of human material is limited. Whole coronary arteries can be received only from explanted hearts during heart transplantation. In vitro pharmacology experiments are therefore run on arteries from heart failure patients (New York Heart Association (NYHA) II–IV), and no proper controls for this group can be obtained. For obvious reasons, collection of human coronary arteries from explanted hearts takes time, thereby the limited size of material. For ethical reasons, only biopsies of coronary arteries can be obtained during autopsy and the material is

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only sufficient for real-time polymerase chain reaction, and not in vitro pharmacology experiments.

**Tissue collection.** Biopsies from coronary arteries, used for real-time polymerase chain reaction experiments, were obtained post mortem during autopsy. Included in the study were eight patients that died from heart failure (age 36–80). The patients had suffered from heart failure for a longer period of time. Nine control patients were included. These did not have any known cardiovascular disease at the time of death (controls, age 40–83). In the control group the cause of death was pneumonia (three patients), stroke (three patients), acute respiratory distress syndrome (one patient), sepsis (one patient) and trauma (one patient). The control patients did not have heart failure diagnosed by the time of death, and no atherosclerotic lesions could be identified in the coronary arteries when dissected under a microscope. The relation between the time of death and the time of biopsy was 8–56 hr, and did not differ between the heart failure and the control group. After removal of the endothelium, the vessels were snap frozen in liquid nitrogen and stored at −80°C.

For the in vitro pharmacology experiments, a section of the left anterior descending artery was obtained from 17 human hearts explanted in the process of heart transplantation (age 21–62). None of the patients had been treated with AT1 receptor blockers before surgery. The vessels were removed from the patients and immersed into cold bicarbonate buffer solution (for composition, see below), transported to the laboratory on ice and immediately used for further experiments. For baselines characteristics for the patients with heart failure (table 1).

**Baseline characteristics for the patients with heart failure.** NYHA = New York Heart Association; EF = ejection fraction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clinical diagnosis</th>
<th>Heart failure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dilated cardiomyopathy</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restrictive cardiomyopathy</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ischemic cardiomyopathy</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes mellitus</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypertension</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyperlipidemia</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tricuspid insufficiency</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYHA II</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYHA III</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYHA VI</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean EF, range</td>
<td>22%, 8–55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1.**

Baseline characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean age, range</td>
<td>60 years, 21–86 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (Men/women)</td>
<td>62%/38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smokers</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clinical diagnosis</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dilated cardiomyopathy</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean EF, range</strong></td>
<td>22%, 8–55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Real-time polymerase chain reaction.** Real-time polymerase chain reaction was run on the endothelium-denuded human coronary arteries. Reverse transcription of total RNA to cDNA was carried out using the GeneAmp RNA polymerase chain reaction kit in a Perkin-Elmer RNA Thermal cycler (Perkin-Elmer Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA, USA). First strand cDNA was synthesized from 0.5–1 μg total RNA in a 100 μl reaction using random hexamers as primers. Real-time polymerase chain reaction was performed in a GeneAmp 5700 Sequence Detection System using the GeneAmp SYBR® Green kit (Perkin-Elmer, Applied Biosystems Foster City, CA, USA) with the cDNA synthesized above as template in a 50 μl reaction. A no-template control was included in all experiments. The GeneAmp 5700 Sequence Detection System monitors the am-

*Fig. 1. AT₁ (A) and AT₂ (B) receptor mRNA expression levels assessed by real-time polymerase chain reaction in human coronary arteries from patients with heart failure and controls. Values are presented as mean values ± S.E.M relative to the GAPDH levels. Statistical significance was accepted when P < 0.05, using Student’s t-test.*
plification of DNA in real-time using an optic imaging system, via the binding of a fluorescent dye to double-stranded DNA. Specific primers for the human AT1 and AT2 receptors were designed as follows:

**AT1 receptor**
- forward; 5'-ACC TGG CTA TTG TTC ACC CAA-3'
- reverse; 5'-ACA AGC ATT GTG CGT CGA AG-3'

**AT2 receptor**
- forward; 5'-CCT CGC TGT GGC TGA TTT ACT C-3'
- reverse; 5'-CTT TGC ACA TCA CAG GTC CAA-3'

β-Actin and glyceraldehyde 3-phosphate dehydrogenase (GAPDH) were used as references, since they are continuously expressed in constant amounts in cells.

The real-time polymerase chain reaction was performed with the following profile: 50°C for 2 min., 95°C for 10 min., 40 cycles of 95°C for 15 sec. and 60°C for 1 min. To prove that the cDNA of β-actin, GAPDH, AT1 and AT2 receptors were amplified with the same efficiency during the real-time polymerase chain reaction experiments, standard curves for each primer pair were made (fig. 1) in which the CT values were plotted against cDNA concentration on the basis of the following equation: $CT = \log (1 + E)^{-1} \log (concentration)$, where $C_T$ is the number of polymerase chain reaction cycles performed in 1 sample at a specific point of time, and $E$ is the amplification efficiency with an optimal value of 1. To prove that each primer pair generates only one polymerase chain reaction product, an agarose gel electrophoresis with the polymerase chain reaction products was run. The lengths of the products were 101 base pairs for both AT1 and AT2. This corresponds to the expected size of the AT1 and the AT2 cDNA from the gene bank was examined with the program Primer Express 2.0.

**Drugs and solutions.** The bicarbonate buffer solution for the in vitro pharmacology experiments was of the following composition in mM: 119 NaCl, 15 NaHCO3, 4.6 KCL, 1.2 MgCl2, 1.2 NaH2PO4, 1.5 CaCl2 and 5.5 glucose. Adenosine 5'-O-thiodiphosphate (Sigma Co., USA) was dissolved in 0.9% saline. Angiotensin II (Sigma Co., USA) was dissolved in 0.1% bovine serum albumin. Oligonucleotides and reagents for the real-time polymerase chain reaction assay were purchased from Perkin-Elmer, Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA, USA.

**Calculations and statistics.** In vitro pharmacology: All calculations and statistics were performed using GraphPad 4.0 software. $E_{\max}$ refers to the maximum contraction calculated as percent of the contractile capacity of 63.5 mM K⁺. The negative logarithm of the drug concentration that elicited 50% contraction (pEC50) was determined by linear regression analysis using the values immediately above and below half-maximum response. Statistical significance

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**Fig. 2.** AT1 (A and B) and AT2 (C and D) receptor mRNA expression levels assessed by real-time polymerase chain reaction in human coronary arteries from patients with heart failure (A and C) and controls (B and D). The results were correlated to the patients’ ages and illustrated with a linear regression line and a 95% confidence interval. Values are presented as mean values±S.E.M relative to the GAPDH levels. Statistical significance was accepted when $P<0.05$, using Student’s t-test.
Real-time polymerase chain reaction.

The AT$_1$ and AT$_2$ receptor mRNA expression levels were lower in coronary arteries from patients with heart failure as compared to controls ($P<0.001$, fig. 1A and B). There was no difference in age between the heart failure patients and the controls (heart failure; $63\pm8$ years, controls; $59\pm3$ years, $P=\text{n.s.}$). The AT$_1$ receptor mRNA expression levels decreased with increasing age in patients with heart failure ($r^2=0.74$, $P<0.05$), while no correlation could be shown in the control group ($r^2=0.04$, $P=\text{n.s.}$, fig. 2A and B). The AT$_3$ receptor mRNA expression levels did not correlate with increasing age in patients with heart failure ($r^2=0.01$, $P=\text{n.s.}$) or controls ($r^2=0.07$, $P=\text{n.s.}$, fig. 2C and D).

mRNA expression levels were higher for the AT$_1$ than for the AT$_2$ receptor, both in arteries from patients with heart failure and controls (fig. 1A and B). The standard curves for the AT$_1$, AT$_2$, $\beta$-actin and GAPDH cDNA primer pairs are shown in fig. 3. Similar patterns of AT$_1$ and AT$_2$ receptor mRNA expression could be shown when using $\beta$-actin for reference gene as compared to GAPDH (data not shown), indicating that these genes were trustworthy as references. Electrophoresis of the polymerase chain reaction products demonstrated that each primer pair generated only the expected product with a length of 101 base pairs for AT$_1$ and 101 base pairs for AT$_2$. The no-template control showed no signs of contaminating nucleic acids (data not shown).

In vitro pharmacology. Coronary arteries for the in vitro pharmacology experiments were obtained during heart surgery from patients with heart failure (NYHA II–IV). In these arteries, the efficacy of the contractile response to angiotensin II declined with increasing age ($r^2=0.31$, $P<0.05$, fig. 4 and 5), while the potency was unchanged ($pEC_{50}=8.1\pm0.2$, $r^2=0$, $P=\text{n.s.}$), indicating receptor down-regulation. The patients’ ages ranged from 21 to 62 years.
The $K^+$-induced contraction was not affected by age ($P = \text{n.s.}$), indicating intact smooth muscle cell function.

**Discussion**

The levels of AT$_1$ and AT$_2$ receptor mRNA were reduced in coronary artery smooth muscle cells from patients with heart failure as compared to controls. This may result in a less efficacious angiotensin II response. Unfortunately, functional studies can not be performed on arteries obtained during post mortem autopsy due to limited tissue supply. Many studies have been performed in animals to evaluate the effect of angiotensin II in the vasculature during heart failure. Increased as well as unaltered or impaired responses to angiotensin II have been described, and the results do not provide a consistent picture (Didion et al. 1997; Stassen et al. 1997; Ikenaga et al. 1999; Miller et al. 2000; Touyz & Schiffrin 2000; Gschwend et al. 2003). In this respect, the vascular adaptation mechanisms may differ depending on duration and severity of heart failure and the arterial bed investigated.

The down-regulation of angiotensin II receptor mRNA expression levels in heart failure is supported by previous data showing that when coronary arteries are obtained mainly from humans dead in accidents, the pEC$_{50}$ value for angiotensin II is 9.3 (Holmgren et al. 1998). When coronary arteries from explanted failing hearts are studied the pEC$_{50}$ value is 7.7 (Pantev et al. 2002) and 8.1 (in the present study). In the present study, 32% of the patients with heart failure had the diagnosis ischemic heart disease. It has been shown before by autoradiography that AT$_1$ receptors are down-regulated in coronary arteries from humans with ischemic heart disease (Katugampola & Davenport 2000). Down-regulation of angiotensin II receptors might make the coronary arteries less prone to develop spasm and atherosclerotic plaques and thus restore vital blood circulation to the failing heart despite the elevated circulating levels of angiotensin II (Zimmerman & Davison 2004).

The cause of angiotensin II receptor changes in heart failure is not known although alterations in the neurohormonal pathways involving both the renin-angiotensin system and sympathetic nervous system may be of importance. Constricting factors (e.g. thromboxane A2, angiotensin II and endothelin-1), vasodilating factors (e.g. nitric oxide) and inflammatory hormones (cytokines) are released locally by the endothelium, nerve terminals, platelets and leukocytes during heart failure. These have been suggested to participate in vascular remodelling and feedback to the forebrain and hypothalamic centres to stimulate further sympathetic activation (Fang & Marwick 2002; Felder et al. 2003). Increased systemic or local production of angiotensin II may have stimulated receptor down-regulation via a negative feedback system. It has been shown before that exposure to angiotensin II induces down-regulation of AT$_1$ receptor mRNA in rat aortic vascular smooth muscle cells and cultured rat glomerular cells (Makita et al. 1992; Lassegue et al. 1995).

*In vitro* pharmacological studies were performed on coronary arteries from hearts explanted during the procedure of heart transplantation (NYHA II–IV). The present results show that the angiotensin II-induced vasoconstriction declines with increasing age in human coronary arteries from patients with heart failure (table 1). The efficacy of the contraction was decreased while the potency was unaltered, which may reflect a change in receptor expression or intracellular pathways according to receptor theories (Black & Leff 1983). Previous studies on isolated arteries have demonstrated a reduced angiotensin II contraction in old animals (Marin 1995). The $K^+$-induced vasoconstriction was not altered by age in the present study, indicating that the contractile machinery is unaffected, which has been shown by others (Marin 1995).

The mechanisms responsible for the decreased angiotensin II-induced vasoconstriction in old humans are not known. Other contractile receptors, e.g. adrenoceptors, have been shown to be down-regulated in arteries from old humans (Marin 1995). It is believed that the adrenoceptors are desensitised due to elevated levels of catecholamines in plasma (Marin 1995). Aging induces over-expression of tissue angiotensin-converting enzyme (Belmin et al. 1994). Most of the angiotensin II that induces vasoconstriction is synthesised locally in the vascular wall by tissue renin-angiotensin system (Touyz & Schiffrin 2000). Presumably this results in increased angiotensin II concentrations in the vascular wall and subsequent angiotensin II receptor down-regulation.

In previous *in vitro* pharmacology studies, it has been shown that the angiotensin II-induced vasoconstriction in human coronary arteries is mediated by AT$_1$ receptors, since the response was inhibited by candesartan, and AT$_2$ receptors, since the response was inhibited by and PD123319 (Pantev et al. 2002). When analysing the present real-time polymerase chain reaction experiments, both AT$_1$ and AT$_2$ receptor mRNA were detected. The AT$_1$ receptor mRNA expression levels decreased with increasing age in patients with heart failure, while no such correlation could be shown for the AT$_2$ receptor. Thus, the diminished angiotensin II vasoconstriction with increasing age in heart failure patients is most likely due to a lower density of AT$_1$ receptors. The AT$_1$ receptor mRNA expression levels were decreases in old patients in the heart failure group, but not in the control group. These results suggest that the decrease AT$_1$ receptor mRNA expression and angiotensin II-induced vasoconstriction with increasing age may be a result of a longer period of exposure to heart failure in older patients, although other factors that change with increasing age can not be excluded.

In conclusion, the present study demonstrates for the first time that AT$_1$ and AT$_2$ receptor mRNA expression levels are decreased in arteries from patients with heart failure as compared to controls. AT$_1$ receptor mRNA was expressed in higher amounts than AT$_2$ receptor mRNA, which is in accordance with the assumption that AT$_1$ receptors are of major importance in mediating the vasocontractile effects
of angiotensin II (Pantev et al. 2002). AT1 and AT2 receptor mRNA expression levels were significantly down-regulated in arteries from patients with heart failure as compared to controls. The angiotensin II-induced vasoconstriction diminished with increasing age in patients with heart failure. Also, the AT1 receptor mRNA expression levels decreased with increasing age in patients with heart failure, while no such correlation could be shown in the control group. Thereby, the diminished angiotensin II vasoconstriction with increasing age in heart failure patients is most likely due to a lower density of AT1 receptors and may result from a longer period of exposure to heart failure in older patients. Since the angiotensin II-induced vasoconstriction decreases with increasing age, a treatment with angiotensin-converting enzyme or an AT1 receptor inhibitor may be less effective in elderly patients. Tailoring the treatment, e.g. treating younger patients with heart failure or hypertension with angiotensin-converting enzyme or AT1 receptor inhibitor while using different pharmaceutical agents for elderly patients, may be more beneficial.

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References


