Erectile Dysfunction in Patients in a Cardiac Rehabilitation Program

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Introduction and objectives. Erectile dysfunction is common in patients with coronary heart disease. The aim of this study was to investigate the incidence of, etiological factors associated with, and treatment results obtained in this condition in patients participating in a cardiac rehabilitation program.

Methods. The study included 420 male patients with heart disease who were taking part in a multicomponent therapeutic program that involved physical exercise, psychological techniques, and risk factor reduction.

Results. Overall, erectile dysfunction was present in 216 patients (52.6%) and there were clear associations with age (P<.001), diabetes mellitus (P<.001), arterial hypertension (P=.029), cigarette smoking (P=.044), and treatment with angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors (P=.003) and diuretics (P<.001). However, there were no links to treatment with beta-blockers, calcium antagonists, statins, or antiplatelet agents. There were direct associations with trait anxiety (P=.009) and state anxiety (P=.006) and with depression (P=.003). The final multivariate analysis model included diabetes mellitus, smoking, diuretic use, state anxiety and age as significant variables. Only 59 patients agreed to treatment with a phosphodiesterase-5 inhibitor, with positive results in 45 (76.27%). Treatment was contraindicated in 41 patients because they were taking nitrates for myocardial ischemia. The remaining patients expressed no interest, had relationship problems, or were worried about complications.

Conclusions. The incidence of erectile dysfunction was substantial. The condition was directly associated with risk factors for atherosclerosis, treatment, and psychological disorders (ie, anxiety and depression).

Relationship problems and the fear of complications may explain why many patients refused to take phosphodiesterase-5 inhibitors.

Key words: Erectile dysfunction. Cardiac rehabilitation. Risk factors. Relationship problems. Phosphodiesterase-5 inhibitors.
INTRODUCTION

The incidence of erectile dysfunction (ED) in the healthy population and in different diseases is well documented. Its etiology is varied, occasionally coexisting with a different situations: advanced age, relationship problems, organic and psychological diseases, medical treatments, lack of information, fear of possible complications, etc.

Variable percentages have been described (38%-78%) in cardiac patients, fundamentally after an acute myocardial infarction (AMI).1

Several oral pharmaceutical products have appeared in recent years, including phosphodiesterase inhibitors (PDE-5), which have been shown to be effective in the treatment of this condition. However, a noticeably small percentage of patients accept taking these drugs.

Several explanations of this negative attitude have been suggested, among which the fear of complications predominates, this being an effect that seems to be more prominent among cardiac patients because of the sensational news published in daily newspapers.

Meanwhile, cardiologists and patients who have suffered from acute coronary events do not usually talk about matters of a sexual nature. The study by Bedell et al2 showed that 97% of men and 82% of women did not feel they received sufficient information in this respect.

When considered necessary, the diagnostic and therapeutic management of the male patients’ sexual activity was analysed.

All the patients gave their written consent to being included in the CRP, as usual in the unit, and the study was approved by the hospital ethics committee.

The CRP described above3 is started between 10 and 15 days after discharge from hospital in patients with acute coronary syndromes, and at 6 weeks when the patient has undergone revascularisation surgery.

The multidisciplinary programme, with an average duration of 2-3 months, includes: a) supervised, personalised physical training; b) psychological action with behaviour modifying techniques, group therapy and relaxation sessions; c) educational programme on modifying lifestyle and controlling risk factors; and d) social and vocational advice.

The physical training, predominantly aerobic, was carried out 5 days a week. The training heart rate (THR) was calculated individually, based on the results of the stress test, maximum or limited by the symptoms seen at the beginning and end of the programme.

The psychological programme consists of an initial assessment with a study of the psychological profile, by conducting an interview and completing questionnaires to evaluate anxiety (STAI)4 and depression (Beck),5 and
The incidence of risk factors and conditions of an atherosclerotic nature in the study patients was: diabetes 16.19%, tobacco smoking 87.64%, dyslipidemia diagnosed prior to admission 17.91%, arterial hypertension 39.19%, lower limb arterial disease 4.98%.

The percentage of patients treated with different drugs is shown in Table 2.

The mean age of patients with ED (60.61 [8.7]) was significantly older than those in the group without dysfunction (52.78 [9.4]) with P<.001.

We found a clear relationship between the incidence of ED and the existence of diabetes, arterial hypertension, and those treated with ACEI and diuretics. There was no relationship when peripheral arterial disease was analysed, or in the case of treatment with beta-blockers, calcium channel blockers, statins, and antiplatelet drugs. (Tables 3 and 4).

The group of patients diagnosed with dyslipidemia before arriving at the hospital was very low (17.91%), the great majority of them being unaware of their cholesterol and triglycerides. No direct connection was
found with the presence of ED; 21 patients suffered from this and 22 did not.

Psychological disorders had a significant influence on the sexual area, as shown in the questionnaires analysing state-trait anxiety (STAI) and depression (Beck) (Table 5). We considered scores above 80 in the state-trait (STAI) and 16 in the Beck to be abnormal values.

In the multivariate analysis, the maximum model included the variables of diabetes mellitus, arterial hypertension, peripheral vascular disease, tobacco smoking, β-blockers, ACEIs, diuretics, Beck, STAI (trait), STAI (state), and age.

The final model included the variables of diabetes mellitus, tobacco smoking, diuretics, Beck, STAI (trait), STAI (state), and age (Table 6). The Nagelkerke’s R² was equal to 0.288. The predictive capacity of the model was analysed with the area under the ROC curve, which was equal to 0.77.

The analysis of the SHIM questionnaire showed that 216 patients (52.6%) scored below 20, the limit for considering the possibility of erectile dysfunction. A total of 17.9% had between 15 and 19 points, 14.9% from 10 to 14, and the rest (18.7%) from 0 to 9.

Six patients with more than 20 points asked for a consultation with the ED unit, 4 presented premature ejaculation and another 2 had lack of desire but not dysfunction. Sixteen patients with scores below 20 were not considered as having ED.

There were contraindications against treatment with PDE-5 inhibitors in 41 coronary patients, due to ischemia at low stress levels in 16 cases and to the need to take nitrates in all of them since they presented clinically and/or electrically positive stress tests. After the consultation, only 3 agreed to be seen by the urologist. Fifty five were not interested in having treatment. The reasons given were one or more of the following: lack of desire, advanced age (some aged 60), and fundamentally (52 of them) due to a poor relationship with their partners. The rest of the patients, 104, were interviewed during the consultation. In spite of the advice given, only 4 of them attended with their partners. After the interview, 6 of them said they would think about the possibility of receiving treatment, while 98 of them agreed to take a PDE-5 inhibitor.

In the subsequent consultation for the results, 39 had not taken the product for a variety of reasons, the most common of which was fear of taking it, in spite of the explanations given, and the refusal of the partner, in 35 of them. In 3 cases, they did not take it after a consultation with their family doctor or cardiologist. The product had a positive effect in 45 (76.27%) of the 59 patients who had taken the medication. Three of the patients who were not considered to have obtained good

### Table 2. Drug Treatment Followed by the Patients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>Patients, No. (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beta-blockers</td>
<td>331 (78.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACEIs</td>
<td>210 (50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calcium channel blockers</td>
<td>92 (21.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diuretics</td>
<td>51 (12.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statins</td>
<td>360 (85.71)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antiplatelet drugs</td>
<td>383 (91.19)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3. The Incidence of Erectile Dysfunction With Regard to Other Risk Factors for Atherosclerosis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Erectile Dysfunction</th>
<th>No, No. (%)</th>
<th>Yes, No. (%)</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes</td>
<td>18 (26.5)</td>
<td>50 (73.5)</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arterial hypertension</td>
<td>69 (41.8)</td>
<td>96 (58.2)</td>
<td>.029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peripheral vascular disease</td>
<td>6 (28.6)</td>
<td>15 (71.4)</td>
<td>.061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobacco smoking</td>
<td>172 (46.6)</td>
<td>197 (53.4)</td>
<td>.044</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4. Incidence of Erectile Dysfunction With Regard to Drug Treatment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Erectile Dysfunction</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beta-blockers</td>
<td>167 (50.5)</td>
<td>164 (49.5)</td>
<td>.137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACEIs</td>
<td>87 (41.4)</td>
<td>123 (58.6)</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calcium channel blockers</td>
<td>46 (50.0)</td>
<td>46 (50.0)</td>
<td>.756</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diuretics</td>
<td>13 (25.5)</td>
<td>38 (74.5)</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statins</td>
<td>178 (49.4)</td>
<td>182 (50.6)</td>
<td>.381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antiplatelet drugs</td>
<td>189 (49.3)</td>
<td>194 (50.7)</td>
<td>.306</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 5. Erectile Dysfunction and Psychological Disorders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Erectile Dysfunction</th>
<th>No, No. (%)</th>
<th>Yes, No. (%)</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beck</td>
<td>6 (21.4)</td>
<td>22 (78.6)</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STAI (trait)</td>
<td>15 (31.2)</td>
<td>33 (68.8)</td>
<td>.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STAI (state)</td>
<td>22 (33.3)</td>
<td>44 (66.7)</td>
<td>.006</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 6. Multivariate Analysis of the Relationship Between Different Coronary Factors and the Treatment and Incidence of Erectile Dysfunction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exp(B)</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>1.094</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes</td>
<td>2.746</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobacco smoking</td>
<td>2.104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diuretics</td>
<td>2.563</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STAI (state)</td>
<td>3.341</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CI: confidence interval.
results, had undergone radical prostate cancer surgery. Four went to the andrology department.

**DISCUSSION**

Sexual disorders have a very negative effect on the quality of life of patients with heart diseases it has been described in over 50% of males, and although there is less information on female sexuality, an even larger proportion seems to be involved.10-12

The subjective reason for the sexual dysfunction described by the 2 women in our programme was the deterioration of the relationship with the partner, similar to that described by Abramov11 many years ago and by Yildizh12 in 2000.

The existence of a stable relationship signified greater sexual activity, 73% in men and 57% in women, decreasing to 30% and 5% when it did not exist.13 On the other hand, if the emotional relationship had already deteriorated, the disease could be the justification for not recommencing it.

We believe that relationship problems have a definitive effect on the management of sexual dysfunction in our patients. Perhaps it is anecdotal that in 3 patients it was fundamental that their doctor (2 cardiologists and 1 family physician) advised them not to take the PDE-5 inhibitor prescribed at the unit, even though they admitted there were no contraindications at all.

Sexual disorders, until very recent times, were to have a mainly psychological etiology and have been described up to 80% in severe depressive syndromes. However, over time, organic disorders become more frequent, comprising 80% in males aged over 70 years, as opposed to 20% of psychological origin.14

Some authors considered that ED and ischemic heart disease have endothelial dysfunction as a common substrate, explaining the high incidence of sexual disorders in the coronary patient.15 The evidence of the greatest percentage of ED in our patients with AHT and tobacco smoking, risk factors for atherosclerosis, supports this theory. We believe that the dyslipidemia data in our patients is unreliable, owing to lack of control data. The small number of patients with peripheral vascular diseases means that there are no statistically significant differences, in spite of the high percentage of ED in these patients (71.4% with sexual disorders and 28.6% without them).

The great majority of drugs used (beta-blockers, hypotensive drugs, diuretics, hypolipidemic agents, etc) in cardiac patients may increase the incidence of ED but, paradoxically, may have a positive influence if they control angina, heart failure, etc. In these patients, we have found a higher incidence of ED in those treated with ACEIs and diuretics, but not with the rest of the products analysed.

It is perhaps interesting that it is not present in the 331 patients receiving beta-blockers. The explanation could lie in the fact that atenolol has been described as being the least negative of this therapeutic family and in the recently described fact that the knowledge of the product and their possible negative effects on sexuality have a significantly negative effect in the presentation of the disorders.16

The absence of sexual activity in the couple after a myocardial infarction, in the presence of normal personal relations, is usually the consequence of fear of the complications which might present. The medical information may have a positive effect in this respect or, on the other hand, a very negative effect, as occurred in 3 of our patients.

There is sufficient evidence that the severity of complications, death or risk of infarction during coitus, are extremely low. Muller et al.17 in 858 sexually active patients before the AMI, consider that the sexual intercourse increases the absolute risk in such an insignificant percentage as a chance in a million.

The energy expenditure is around 5 METS during orgasm, and 3.7 in the pre- and post orgasmic phase.7 Heart rate and arrhythmia during sexual activity have been described in similar percentages to those of daily activities, although it must be taken into account that there are wide variations based on multiple factors: the physical characteristics of the patient, those of the partner, the emotional situation, having eaten a large meal, extramarital relations, etc.1

Our study, after a univariate and multivariate analysis, seems to show that sexual dysfunction in cardiac patients is a complex phenomenon relating to different variables such as age, risk factors for atherosclerotic heart disease, medication, and psychological disorders. All these factors must be taken into account when it comes to managing this condition.

The information is of the utmost importance. It is necessary to talk to the patient’s partner, in order to deal with the fear of coital death, before release from hospital or when the diagnosis is made.

CRP have positive effects in this respect, as a result of the actions mentioned above. Of 180 post-infarction patients, divided randomly into 2 groups, we found a lower percentage of impotence in the short and long term (P<0.02) in the rehabilitated group, in a period of time in which we did not have oral substances for its treatment.18

The management of erectile dysfunction has greatly improved since the appearance on the market of phosphodiesterase 5 (sildenafil, vardenafil, tadalafil).

They have proven very effective and provide optimum results in around 80%, 75.27% in our patients, and do not cause complications of any type. By perfecting planning its use, the risks are reduced to a minimum.

Their administration is absolutely contraindicated in patients treated with nitrates or nitric oxide donors (NO) in any form. These patients present raised NO levels in blood, and these drugs can strengthen the vasodilator effect of the exogenous NO as they inhibit the
phosphodiesterase enzyme present in the cells of the vascular smooth muscle cells, leading to a significant reduction in blood pressure.

PDE-5 inhibitors and any other sexual treatments (vacuum systems, intracavernosal injections, etc) should be viewed with caution when it comes to advising sexual activity in patients with angina when doing on medium or low effort or uncontrolled conditions such as arrhythmia, heart failure, and arterial hypertension.

We believe this study can be used to draw important conclusions for managing ED in cardiac patients. The following are worth noting: a) there is an incidence of over 50%; b) the etiology depends on the existence of risk factors for atherosclerosis, the treatment followed and psychological problems; c) it is probable that a good relationship with the partner may have a positive effect on solving the problem; d) it is essential for the healthcare professionals to provide enough, good information; e) when there are not contraindications, the use of PDE-5 inhibitors gives excellent results.

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REFERENCES