**Experimental Study of the so Called Left Ventricular Isovolumic Relaxation Phase**

Juan A. Cosín Aguilar, Amparo Hernándiz Martinez, M. Teresa Tuzón Segarra, Jaime Agüero Ramón-Llin, and Francisco Torrent-Guasp (†)

Unidad de Cardiología Experimental, Centro de Investigación, Hospital Universitario La Fe, Valencia, Spain

**Introduction and objectives.** Left ventricular filling begins in the ventricular isovolumic relaxation phase. According to the Torrent-Guasp myocardial band theory, this phase results from the contraction of the final portion of the myocardial band: the ascending segment of the apical loop. The objectives were to study the myocardial mechanisms influencing transmural flow during early diastole and to determine whether the rapid ventricular filling phase involves contraction or relaxation.

**Methods.** An experimental in vivo pig model was used. Regional contractility in 3 segments of the myocardial band was assessed using piezoelectric crystals and mitral flow was measured by echo-Doppler ultrasonography at baseline and after akinesia had been induced in the ascending segment by 2.5% formaldehyde infusion. Changes in intracavitary pressure in the left ventricle and left atrium and flow alterations in the aortic root were recorded. The start of the isovolumic relaxation phase was identified using the time at which the ejection of blood ceases, as indicated by aortic flow measurements.

**Results.** During the left ventricular isovolumetric relaxation phase, the ascending segment of the apical loop was undergoing contraction. The infusion of formaldehyde into this segment affected the extent to which the intraventricular pressure could decrease, prolonged the isovolumic relaxation phase and resulted in a lower minimum pressure. It also produced a significant decrease in transmitral flow velocity in early diastole and an increase at end-diastole.

**Conclusions.** The rapid ventricular filling phase is characterized by contraction.

**Key words:** Diastole. Contractility. Heart failure.

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**INTRODUCTION**

According to Torrent-Guasp and other authors, the ventricular myocardium consists of a continuous band of muscle that extends from the pulmonary...
myocardial wall. Hemodynamically, this involves 80% of the filling volume and is produced with nearly no contribution on the part of atrial factors.10

What is difficult to imagine and to demonstrate is the fact that the isovolumic relaxation phase and the subsequent rapid filling are a consequence of the contraction of the final portion of the myocardial band. However, this would explain why whenever systolic dysfunction develops, it is accompanied by diastolic dysfunction, why the index $T$ (the time constant of the pressure fall during the isovolumic contraction phase) depends on the contractility, and is improved by isoproterenol,12 and even why diastolic dysfunction with normal or “preserved” systolic function is an entity for which the significance, identification and treatment remain unclear.13-17

The experimental studies that we present here have been carried out for the purpose of determining the myocardial mechanisms involved in early diastolic transmitral flow. Specifically, we wanted to know whether the phase of rapid ventricular filling is a process of relaxation or contraction.18

To address this question, we will examine whether the contraction of the ascending segment of the apical loop coincides temporally with the so-called left ventricular isovolumic relaxation phase and whether the induction of hypokinesia or akinesia limited to that segment has a negative effect on early transmitral flow, the rate of the intraventricular pressure fall during the isovolumic contraction phase and the minimum pressure reached in left ventricle.

METHODS

We studied 12 pigs of both sexes with a mean weight of 28.2 (5.1) kg. They had been bred in
the Veterinary Unit of the Research Center of our hospital. The experiments were performed in accordance with the Spanish and European guidelines for the “Protection of animals used for experimental and other scientific purposes” (Royal Decree 223/1988 and Royal Decree 1201/2005). The surgical procedures were carried out by investigators who possessed the European certificate of training in animal experimentation (Royal Decree 1201/2005).

Preparation of the Experiments

On the day of the experiment, the animals are preanesthetized and sedated in their stalls by intramuscular injection of midazolam (0.5 mg/kg body weight) and ketamine (10 mg/kg body weight). Anesthesia is induced in the experimental operating room by the intravenous route (thiopental, 10 mg/kg body weight), and endotracheal intubation and catheterization of the external jugular vein are carried out. Anesthesia is maintained with sevoflurane (2.5%) in a mixture of 40% oxygen and 60% nitrous oxide, delivered by means of a ventilator (Temel VT3, Spain). Analgesia and relaxation are initiated with vecuronium bromide (0.08 mg/kg body weight) and morphine hydrochloride (0.7 mg/kg body weight) and are maintained with vecuronium bromide (0.08 mg/kg body weight) and 20 mg of morphine hydrochloride in 50 mL of serum in an infusion pump at a rate of 12 mL/h. Median sternotomy is performed, followed by pericardiectomy. The mechanical ventilation is adjusted to a rate between 16 and 20 breaths per minute and to a gas flow of approximately 5 L/min, depending on the oximetries in blood. The peripheral electrocardiogram, blood pH, blood gases, hematocrit, and rectal temperature are monitored throughout the entire experiment. The temperature is maintained with an electric blanket.

Segmental Function

Three pairs of ultrasonic microcrystals (Biopac Systems, Santa Barbara, California, USA) are implanted into the myocardium: one pair in the mesocardium (at a depth of approximately 4 to 5 mm) of the lateral aspect of left ventricle corresponding to the basal loop, left lateral segment (P1), following the direction of the longitudinal axis of the heart; another pair in the subendocardium of the anterior aspect of the middle third of left ventricle, between the first and second diagonal branches of anterior descending artery and tangential to it, a zone corresponding to the ascending segment of the apical loop (P2); and, finally, another pair in the subepicardium (at a depth of 1 to 2 mm) of the anterior aspect of left ventricle, between the first and second diagonal branches of the anterior descending artery and parallel to the anterior descending artery toward the aortic root, in a zone corresponding to the ascending segment of the apical loop (P3) (Figure 1). The pairs of microcrystals are aligned following the direction of the muscle fibers of the zone in which they are placed. They are separated by approximately 2 cm. The P2 pairs are anchored in the subendocardium by means of transseptal puncture, reaching the ventricular cavity and drawing back in order to deposit them in the subendocardium, forming a cross with the P3 pairs in the subepicardium. The pairs of crystals enable us to know the relative displacement of the 2 points in the myocardium over which they are secured and, thus, the dynamic properties of the segment contained between them. The acquisition of the regional myocardial contractility curves is achieved with the Sonometrics Corporation Digital Ultrasonic Measurement System (London, Ontario, Canada).

Intracavitary Pressures

A catheter is inserted through the left ventricular free wall for monitoring left ventricular pressure and another is inserted through the auricula to measure left atrial pressure; both catheters are connected to pressure transducers (Transpac IV, USA).

Aortic Flow

The aortic root is dissected and an electromagnetic flow meter is placed (Transonic Systems, New York, United States).

Transmitral Flow

A Doppler echocardiogram was carried out (Interspec XL Doppler, USA) with a 5-MHz probe, directly over the epicardium, to record the transmitral flow from an apical four-chamber view, first in baseline conditions and then after injection of diluted formaldehyde into the myocardial wall.

Induction of Segmental Akinesia

This involves injections of formaldehyde19 diluted to 2.5%, using an atraumatic needle, into the subepicardium (at a depth of 1 to 2 mm) of the ascending segment of the apical loop, where the P2 pairs of crystals are situated. A maximum of 0.8 mL of the indicated dilution are injected, distributed among 3 and 4 injections. After each injection, the effect produced on the fraction of segment
shortening is monitored until akinesia or dyskinesia is achieved in the given segment.

Data Collection

The records corresponding to: ECG (I, II, or III), left ventricular pressure in mm Hg, left atrial pressure in mm Hg, aortic flow (mL/min), and sonometric data of the 3 myocardial band segments indicated are digitized and stored in an electronic memory (BIOPAC Systems Inc, Santa Barbara, California, United States). The transmitral flow velocity curves and values obtained using Doppler echocardiography (m/s) are stored separately.

Once the experiments are completed, the animals are sacrificed under anesthesia by means an intravenous injection of potassium chloride. After removal of the anatomical structure (the heart), the anatomical site of the 3 pairs of crystals is verified, the anterior left ventricular wall is dissected, following the route of the interventricular artery, and the depth at which each crystal is implanted is verified, as is the region of the muscle infiltrated with formaldehyde.

Parameters Analyzed

In the Doppler echocardiogram, we study the maximal transmitral flow velocities at the beginning (E) and end (A) of diastole and the E/A ratio. The intracavitary pressure curves provide the maximum left ventricular systolic pressure, the minimum left ventricular pressure, the left ventricular end-diastolic pressure (LVEDP), the time elapsed from aortic valve closure until the intraventricular pressure surpasses the end-diastolic pressure by 10 mm Hg, which corresponds to the isovolumic relaxation time; at this point, we can be sure that this is the isovolumic phase with the mitral valve still closed.

Analysis of the Results

The variables studied are continuous, and the results are expressed as the mean plus or minus the standard deviation. The changes in the variables following the blockade with formaldehyde with respect to baseline conditions have been studied. The comparison of the means was carried out using Student t test for paired samples or the Mann-Whitney nonparametric test for data that did not show a normal distribution. A P value less than .05 was considered significant. The SPSS statistical package (version 9.0) was employed.

RESULTS

Hemodynamic Changes (Table 1)

The injection of formaldehyde significantly prolongs the time required to surpass the left ventricular end-diastolic pressure by 10 mm Hg
In all experiments, the ascending segment (P3) was in contraction after the aortic flow ceased and the aortic valve closed. The contraction of the last myocardial segment ended in a mean time of 72.7 (26.3) ms after closure of the aortic valve, coinciding with the so-called isovolumic relaxation phase in early diastole (Figure 2), whereas the descending segment (P2) reached maximum contraction 10.6 (44.6) ms after aortic valve closure, and the end of the contraction of the P1 segment (basal loop) preceded the closure of the aortic valve (Table 1).

**Figure 2.** Recording of left ventricular pressure (PVI); electrocardiogram (ECG-DI); segmental contractility in left lateral segment of the basal loop, descending segment of the apical loop and ascending segment of the apical loop; and aortic root flow under baseline conditions (A) and after formaldehyde injection (B). The arrows indicate the points corresponding to aortic valve closure. The changes induced by the injection of formaldehyde are described in the text.

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**End of Myocardial Contraction and Initiation of Diastole**

In order to determine the initiation of the isovolumic relaxation phase, we identified the time at which the ejection of blood ceases in the aortic flow curve and the segmental contraction phase in the corresponding sonometric curves (Figure 2).

**Transmitral Flow**

Table 2 shows the effect produced in the shortening fraction of the monitored segment by the injection of formaldehyde into the ascending segment of
the apical loop. There is a decrease to levels of
dyskinesia (according to protocol) in the injected
segment (P3, ascending segment) and hypokinesia
in the neighboring segment, the descending segment
(P2) of the apical loop. The zones corresponding
to the left lateral segment of the basal loop (P1)
are not altered. In parallel, the transmitral flow is
affected, with changes in the ventricular filling rates
in early diastole and in the E/A ratio; the E wave
decreased as the A wave increased, the E/A ratio
being significantly reduced (P<.01) (Table 2). These
changes occurred immediately after infiltration of
the myocardium and, depending on the extension,
continued until a maximum was reached, after
which there were no additional increases with
subsequent injections. In parallel, there was an
evident change in the transmitral flow curve in the
Doppler echocardiogram (Figure 3).

**DISCUSSION**

When the ventricle ceases to eject the blood,
systole ends and diastole commences. From this
moment, and until the mitral valve opens, there is a
period of time during which both valves are closed,
which is known as the isovolumic relaxation phase.
During this phase, the intraventricular pressure
falls at a constant rate and leads to transmural
and transvalvular pressure gradients towards the
interior of the chamber. A suction effect is produced,
to which the rapidity of early ventricular filling
is immediately attributed and the total or partial
loss of which is a cause of left ventricular diastolic
dysfunction, the pathophysiological substrate of
heart failure with preserved systolic function.

In clinical practice, the diagnosis of heart
failure due to diastolic dysfunction depends on
3 conditions: the presence of signs or symptoms
of heart failure, a normal or slightly decreased left
ventricular ejection fraction, and an increased left
ventricular filling pressure. The latter factor has an
impact and can be measured in the left ventricular
filling curve of the Doppler echocardiogram, in the
prolongation of the isovolumic relaxation period,
in the decrease in the early diastolic velocity (E),
in the prolongation of the deceleration time, in the
increase in the end-diastolic velocity (A), and in the
reduction of the E/A ratio.

Ventricular filling, which identifies the diastolic
time, was attributed to atrial contraction until
1954. It is now accepted that the left ventricle
participates actively with the suction force that
we referred to above. It is an active process that
consumes energy and involves Ca exchange.
A number of authors consider diastole to be a
consequence of the elongation of the myocardial
fibers of the walls of a closed chamber. It would be a
phenomenon linked to muscle relaxation (separation
of the myosin filaments) and to elastic recovery of
the fibers, in which the elastin contained in a collagen
network that makes up the extracellular connective
tissue intervenes, as well as the protein titin as an
element of the recovery of the sarcomere deformed
during systole. The ventricular mechanical
activation during diastole is heterogeneous, with
subendocardial-subepicardial relaxation gradients
at the beginning of diastole.

In the theory of Torrent-Guasp, it is a systolic
phenomenon linked to muscle contraction. The
ejection of the blood is a consequence of the
contraction of the descending segment of the apical
loop; its contraction “screws” the base over the
apex, drawing the 2 parts nearer. The next and
final segment of the muscle band is the ascending
segment of the apical loop, which covers the
descending segment, forming the epicardium of
the anterior aspect as far as the aortic root, and
which has been “stretched out and coiled up” by

**TABLE 2. Parameters of Regional Contractility
and Transmitral Flow**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Block of the Ascending Segment, Apical Loop</th>
<th>Baseline</th>
<th>Formaldehyde</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SF P1, mean (SD), %</td>
<td>8.9 (3.2)</td>
<td>8.4 (2.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SF P2, mean (SD), %</td>
<td>11.6 (5.9)</td>
<td>4.4 (4.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SF P3, mean (SD), %</td>
<td>9.4 (3.2)</td>
<td>–0.4 (4.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E wave, mean (SD), m/s</td>
<td>0.42 (0.1)</td>
<td>0.3 (0.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A wave, mean (SD), m/s</td>
<td>0.32 (0.08)</td>
<td>0.39 (0.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E/A, mean (SD)</td>
<td>1.39 (0.3)</td>
<td>0.78 (0.2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

E/A indicates ratio between the E and A waves of transmitral flow; P1, left lateral segment of the basal loop; P2, descending segment of the apical loop; P3, ascending segment of the apical loop; SD, standard deviation; SF, segment shortening fraction.

aP<.01.
bP<.001.
the contraction of the preceding segment. When it contracts, the ascending segment makes a movement that “unscrews” the base, moving it away from the apex, increasing the longitudinal axis of the heart and producing suction like that which would occur in the interior of a cylinder that moves away from its piston, dynamics that have been observed in humans in magnetic resonance images.27

In this study, we have contributed data that demonstrate that the suction force produced during the isovolumic relaxation phase depends on contraction because it is produced during the phase of segmental contraction and, moreover, that its functionality is strongly linked to the contraction of the ascending segment of the apical loop, specifically:

1. We have shown that, at the beginning of and during the left ventricular isovolumic relaxation phase, the ascending segment of the apical loop is contracting.

2. Infiltration of the ascending segment of the apical loop with diluted formaldehyde directly affects the capacity to reduce the intraventricular pressure or, in other words, the suction force. This aspect has been demonstrated by the prolongation of the time required for the intraventricular pressure to fall to 10 mm Hg over the end-diastolic pressure, a level that enables us to ensure that the mitral valve is still closed and that the lower velocity (that is, more time elapsed) in the pressure fall is in a closed (isovolumic) chamber. It has also been demonstrated by the lower minimum intraventricular pressure reached in early diastole, which is significantly affected when we infiltrate said ascending segment.

3. As a consequence of a lower fall velocity and a less marked final decrease in the intraventricular pressure during the isovolumic phase, the suction effect is lesser and the ventricular filling rate decreases during early diastole, increasing in compensation during end-diastole, as a consequence of a contraction of the “fuller” left atrium. This has been demonstrated by the changes in the values of E, A, and the E/A ratio, as well as by the progressive increase in atrial pressure commencing in early diastole.

Limitations of the Study

The use of ultrasonic crystals is appropriate if we assume that the structure of the myocardium is organized partially or totally in a band and that we have implanted the ultrasonic crystals in the same line that marks the direction of the movement of the fibers. This method is unable to isolate the function of a single segment, as it is part of the same continuum as the others. Thus, the alteration of any given segment would change the contraction in the entire band, as occurs in our model, in which the injection into the ascending segment also significantly modifies the contraction of the fibers contained in P2, identified as pertaining to the descending segment, which neighbors the injected segment.

For the identification of the segments and the direction of their fibers, as well as the postmortem confirmation in the anatomical specimens, we were counseled by Dr Torrent-Guasp. The subendocardial fibers of the descending segment in the zone of the anterior aspect of left ventricle pass through the mesocardium at a certain depth, crossing perpendicularly with those of the ascending segment,28 a circumstance that we have confirmed in the anatomical specimens. For this reason, the crystals anchored in the subendocardium followed a direction that the pair implanted in the corresponding epicardium (ascending segment) crossed perpendicularly.

The muscle involvement secondary to the injection of diluted formaldehyde is difficult to standardize and, of course, it affects all the active and passive properties of the fiber, reducing contraction, relaxation and elasticity to their lowest limits. The attempt has been made to minimize the changes produced by formaldehyde, limiting the amount and number of injections in all the experiments, and monitoring the effect depending on the alteration of the contractility of the injected segment and verifying the change in transmirtal flow. For many researchers, the theories of Dr Torrent-Guasp have opened paths they can follow to progress in the understanding of the physiology of cardiac muscle. Other points continue to be hard to reconcile with previous data.18

CONCLUSIONS

In this new conception of diastolic function, the 3 properties of the myocardial fibers would participate, following a certain order while, at the same time, overlapping. The initial suction with the closed chamber would be a consequence of the contraction of the last segment of the band, as we have attempted to demonstrate with the experiments presented here; the relaxation of the fibers of the successive segments with the mitral valve open would allow rapid filling and, finally, the distensibility would make it possible for the myocardial wall to yield in response to the increase in pressure/volume produced by injection into the atrium.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study was carried out in memory of Dr Francisco Torrent-Guasp.
REFERENCES