Editorial

Left Ventricular Morphology and Diastolic Function in Severe Obesity: Current Views

Morfología ventricular izquierda y función diastólica en la obesidad grave: perspectivas actuales

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Early observations of cardiac morphology in obesity focused primarily on the prominence of epicardial fat.1–2 These include anecdotal descriptions by such luminaries as René Laennec, William Harvey, and Jean Nicholas Corvisart.1 In 1933, Smith and Willius reported autopsy findings on 135 obese patients including 4 who were severely obese.1–3 In this study heart weight increased in proportion to the degree of obesity up to 105 kg and to a lesser extent thereafter.1–3 Heart weight was greater than predicted for normal weight and height in both men and women and was far greater than expected in severely obese persons. Nearly all patients had excess epicardial fat and the authors ascribed increased heart weight to this phenomenon. In 1957, Lillington reported biventricular hypertrophy in a severely obese man who died of pulmonary embolism, thus raising the question of left heart involvement in obesity.1–2 In 1962, Alexander reported the results of a retrospective survey of autopsy studies of extremely obese patients previously cited as having cor pulmonale. Left ventricular hypertrophy (LVH) and pulmonary congestion had been present in each case.1–2 In 1965, Amad et al. reported the results of postmortem studies of 12 severely obese patients.1–2 They confirmed that heart weight was increased in all individuals, but demonstrated that it was largely due to LVH. The left ventricle (LV) wall thickness was increased in 11 of the 12 patients and myocyte hypertrophy on microscopic examination was present in all 12. Right ventricular wall thickness was increased in 1 patient and epicardial fat was increased in 6. A later study of 12 severely obese patients by Warnes and Roberts reported increased heart weight, LV wall thickness, microscopic LVH, and excess epicardial fat in all cases and increased right ventricular wall thickness in 4 patients.1,2 Complicating these observations was the fact that systemic hypertension and/or coronary artery disease were present premortem in many of the subjects in these studies.

The advent of echocardiography permitted premortem assessment of cardiac structure in morbidly obese patients. In a study of 62 normotensive severely obese subjects, Alpert et al. reported LV enlargement in 40%, increased LV wall thickness in 56%, increased LV mass in 64%, left atrial enlargement in 50%, and right ventricular enlargement in 32%.1–2 Multiple studies have compared LV morphology in obese patients to that of lean subjects.2–4 LV mass, mass index, mass/height index, or mass/height2–3 were significantly greater in obese than in lean patients in all of these studies regardless of the severity of obesity.2–4 The LV internal dimension in diastole was significantly larger in mildly, moderately, and severely obese patients compared to lean subjects.2–4 Interventricular septal thickness and LV posterior wall thickness were significantly greater in obese than in lean patients regardless of severity of obesity.2–4 Calculated LV radius to thickness ratios were elevated in most but not all of these studies, suggesting that LVH in obese patients, when present, is usually eccentric.2 It is notable that not all of these studies excluded hypertensive patients. A study by Kasper and coworkers of 409 lean and 43 severely obese patients with heart failure showed a higher prevalence of dilated cardiomyopathy in obese than in lean patients.4 A specific cause was identified in 64% of lean and only 23% of obese patients, thus supporting the existence of a cardiomyopathy of obesity. Myocyte hypertrophy was present in 67% of biopsies of obese patients. Based on postmortem and echocardiographic studies reported during the 1980s and 1990s the following cardiac structural abnormalities were identified in obese subjects: increased heart weight, LV enlargement, increased LV wall thickness, an increased LV radius to thickness ratio, increased LV mass, microscopic LVH, left atrial enlargement, right ventricular enlargement and hypertrophy, and excessive epicardial fat.

With the exception of excessive epicardial fat, the aforementioned abnormalities associated with obesity evolve from altered hemodynamics.5–7 Obesity, particularly severe obesity, produces hemodynamic alterations that predispose to changes in cardiac structure and function.5–7 Excessive adipose accumulation together with increased fat-free mass combine to increase central blood volume. In the absence of systemic hypertension a reduction in systemic vascular resistance facilitates augmentation of cardiac output.5–7 Since heart rate changes little if at all with increasing fat mass, the rise in cardiac output is due entirely to increased LV stroke volume. Augmentation of cardiac output leads to dilatation of the LV, left atrium, and right ventricle. The increase in LV chamber size (and therefore radius) causes LV wall stress to rise in accordance with the law of LaPlace.5–7 This in turn is thought to
predispose to eccentric LVH in the absence of systemic hyperten-
sion.5–7 Studies by Alpert and colleagues have demonstrated that
LVH in normotensive severely obese individuals is due at least in
part to adverse loading conditions (preload and afterload).7
Eccentric LVH is a mechanism for normalizing LV wall stress,
but predisposes to LV diastolic dysfunction.5–7 If hypertrophy fails
to keep pace with dilatation, wall stress remains high and LV
systolic dysfunction may ensue.5–7 The coexistence of high cardiac
output, LVH, and LV diastolic dysfunction (and in some cases
systolic dysfunction) may lead to left heart failure with resultant
pulmonary venous hypertension, pulmonary arterial hypertension
and right heart failure.5–7 Duration of severe obesity has been
identified as an important determinant of alterations of cardiac
performance and structure in severe obesity as well as the
development of heart failure.7 Comorbidities such as systemic
hypertension and the sleep apnea-obesity hypventilation syn-
drome, which are commonly encountered in severely obese
patients, may further alter cardiac structure and function and
contribute to cardiac decompensation.5–7 Systemic hypertension
further augments cardiac output and increases systemic vascular
resistance.5–8 In such patients, a hybrid form of LVH (so-called
eccentric-concentric hypertrophy) may develop.5 With this form of
hypertrophy, LV diastolic chamber size is smaller than with
eccentric hypertrophy and diastolic wall thickness is more
increased.8 The LV mass in such individuals is greater than that
associated with LV eccentric or concentric hypertrophy alone.8
The major cause of right heart failure in morbid obesity is left heart
failure.7 However, this may be facilitated by pre-existent right
ventricular dilation associated with high cardiac output and by
hypoxia-driven pulmonary arterial hypertension resulting from
sleep apnea and obesity hypventilation.5–7

During the past decade several studies have challenged the
notion that LVH is typically eccentric in the setting of obesity.9–12
These studies have identified the presence of concentric LV
remodeling and eccentric LVH in a substantial percentage of
obese patients including severely obese patients.9–12 Concentric LV
remodeling and hypertrophy have been reported in up to 50% of
obese patients with abnormal LV geometry.9–12 In several studies,
concentric LV remodeling/hypertrophy has occurred more fre-
cently than eccentric LVH.9–11 Still other recent studies, including
the one reported by Luaces et al. in the article published in Revista
Española de Cardiología, have identified eccentric LVH as the
predominant form of hypertrophy in obese patients.12,11 Why then
is there such variation in LV geometry in obese patients? Part of
the explanation lies with the newer classification of LV geometry.
The current classification is based on relative wall thickness or the
LV mass to volume ratio. Eccentric LVH is defined as a relative wall
thickness or mass-to-volume ratio of <0.45 in the presence of
increased LV mass. Concentric LV remodeling is defined as relative
wall thickness or a mass to volume ratio ≥0.45 in those with
normal LV mass. Concentric LVH is said to be present when the
relative wall thickness or mass to volume ratio is ≥0.45 in those
with increased LV mass. Thus, what was once classified as
eccentric-concentric LVH is now classified as concentric LVH.
The authors of the study published in Revista Española de
Cardiología utilized the newer classification.11 Another reason
for the reported variation in LV geometry in obese subjects is the
failure to adequately account for systemic hypertension. Many of
the studies reporting a high incidence of concentric LV remodeling
or hypertrophy in obese patients did not exclude those with
systemic hypertension.9,11 While some of those studies adjusted
for the presence of systemic hypertension, they did not take into
account the relative severity of obesity and hypertension, nor did
they adjust for duration of these variables.9,11 This is potentially
important. For example, a patient with longstanding severe obesity
and mild hypertension might be expected to develop eccentric
LVH, whereas a patient with grade 1 obesity and longstanding,
poorly controlled hypertension might be expected to develop
concentric LV remodeling or hypertrophy. Nevertheless, several
studies of patients with uncomplicated obesity have shown high
incidence of concentric LVH remodeling and hypertrophy and
indeed, re-analysis of older studies suggests that these geometric
patterns have always been present to some extent.2,3,6,10,12
Possible reasons for the development of concentric LV remodeling
or hypertrophy in such patients include undiagnosed systemic
hypertension, activation of the sympathetic nervous system and renin-angiotensin-aldosterone system (both of which occur commonly in obesity), stimulation of growth factors such as
insulin-derived growth factors, and altered metabolism of adipokines (eg, leptin and adiponectin).2,3,7 The predominance of
eccentric LVH in the present study probably reflects the fact that
all patients were severely obese and that systemic hypertension,
when present, was relatively modest in severity.11

Multiple studies have assessed the effects of weight loss on LV
morphology.2,3,6,14 In patients with grades 2 and 3 obesity
substantial weight loss has consistently produced significant
reduction of LV mass.2,3,6,14 Alpert et al. showed that the reduction
in LV mass occurred predominantly in those with LVH prior to
weight loss.2 Older studies demonstrated significant reduction in
the LV internal dimension in diastole with weight loss, whereas LV
wall thickness failed to change significantly in most instances.2
In the current study weight loss produced significant decreases in
LV mass, interventricular septal thickness, and LV posterior wall
thickness, but no significant change in the LV internal dimension
in diastole.13 This observation is consistent with the results of recent
studies assessing the effect of weight loss on LV morphology.3,14
The reasons for the disparity between older and newer studies
with regard to reverse remodeling are uncertain. In the current
study 70.7% of patients had some form of LV remodeling prior to
weight loss.13 Following weight loss 58.8% of patients exhibited
normal LV geometry.13 This remarkable reversal extends our
knowledge concerning the positive impact of substantial weight
loss on LV morphology in severely obese patients.

Hemodynamic studies of severely obese patients have con-
sistently reported elevated LV end-diastolic or pulmonary capillary
wedge pressure values.4,7 Exercise significantly increases LV filling
pressure, often to levels sufficient to produce pulmonary edema.5
Thus, it is not surprising that even modest exertion causes dyspnea
in such individuals. Multiple studies of obese patients have
assessed LV diastolic filling noninvasively using indices derived
from echocardiography, transmirtal cardiac Doppler flow evalua-
tion, tissue Doppler evaluation, radionuclide techniques, and
magnetic resonance imaging.6,7,10,15–18 Virtually all studies com-
paring grades 1, 2 and 3 obese patients with lean subjects have
shown significantly greater impairment of LV diastolic filling in
obese patients than in lean controls.5,7,15–18 Alpert et al. have
demonstrated that impaired LV diastolic filling in severely obese
patients occurs predominantly in those with increased LV mass
and is related to duration of severe obesity and adverse loading
conditions that predispose to LVH.7,13 Studies assessing the effect
of substantial weight loss on LV filling pressure in severely obese
patients have reported conflicting results.5 That is, LV end-
diastolic or pulmonary capillary wedge pressure does not always
decrease or normalize following weight reduction.5,7 In contrast,
several studies of severely obese patients employing noninvasive
assessment of LV diastolic function have reported improved LV
diastolic filling following substantial weight loss.6,7,14,15,18 In one
study, LV diastolic filling improved in those with increased LV
mass, but not in those with normal LV mass.7 The study reported
by Luaces et al. in Revista Española de Cardiología showed improve-
ment of load-dependent indices of LV diastolic filling following
weight loss, but no significant change in tissue Doppler indices of
LV diastolic function that presumably are load independent. The authors suggest that failure of load-independent LV diastolic function to improve despite regression of LV following substantial weight loss in severely obese patients may be due to myocardial fibrosis. That may well be the case and may explain disparate LV filling pressure responses to weight reduction in severely obese patients. It would have been of interest to compare and contrast LV diastolic function in patients with and without LVH in this study.

The preceding discussion has focused on obesity-related changes in cardiac morphology and performance in adults. An increasing body of evidence suggests that similar LV remodeling occurs in overweight and obese children and adolescents.

In conclusion, the study by Luaces et al. published in Revista Española de Cardiología demonstrates that LV remodeling occurs commonly in severely obese patients. Although eccentric LVH predominated, concentric LVH or remodeling was noted in a substantial percentage of patients. Substantial weight loss from bariatric surgery had a beneficial effect on LV geometry. At 1 year nearly 60% of patients demonstrated normal LV geometry. However, LV diastolic function assessed by tissue Doppler did not significantly change following substantial weight loss despite a decrease in LV mass. This suggests that nonmodifiable factors such as fibrosis may contribute to LV diastolic dysfunction in severe obesity and may prevent improvement in LV diastolic function following weight loss despite regression of LVH.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None declared.

REFERENCES