N-terminal prohormone of brain natriuretic peptide: a useful tool for the detection of acute pulmonary artery embolism in post-surgical patients

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Background. Acute pulmonary embolism (APE) is an important clinical problem in patients after major surgery and often remains a difficult diagnosis because of unspecific clinical symptoms. Therefore, we investigated the role of N-terminal prohormone of brain natriuretic peptide (NT-proBNP) for the detection of APE.

Methods. In 44 patients with suspected APE referred to the intensive care unit after major surgery, serum NT-proBNP, troponin-I, and D-dimers were measured according to the standard hospital protocol. To definitively confirm or exclude APE, all patients underwent an angiographic CT scan of the thorax.

Results. APE was confirmed in 28 and excluded in 16 patients by CT scan. NT-proBNP was significantly \((P<0.01)\) higher in patients with APE \((4425 (SD 8826; range 63–35 000) pg ml^{-1})\) compared with those without \((283 (SD 327; range 13–1133) pg ml^{-1})\). The sensitivity of the NT-proBNP screening was 93%, specificity 63%, positive predictive value 81%, and negative predictive value 83%. There were no significant \((P=0.96)\) differences in D-dimers between subjects with and without APE \((\text{confirmed APE:} 511 (SD 207; range 83–750) \mu g \text{ litre}^{-1}; \text{excluded APE:} 509 (SD 170; range 230–750) \mu g \text{ litre}^{-1})\). Troponin-I levels were not elevated in 32% of the patients with APE.

Conclusions. D-dimer levels are frequently elevated in post-surgical patients and not applicable for confirmation or exclusion of APE. In contrast, NT-proBNP appears to be a useful biomarker for APE diagnosis in the postoperative setting. In the case of NT-proBNP levels below the upper reference limit, haemodynamically relevant APE is unlikely. Troponin-I in contrast is not considered to be helpful.

Keywords: acute pulmonary embolism, APE; cardiac biomarker; D-dimer; lung arterial embolism, LAE LE; N-terminal pro-natriuretic peptide, NT-proBNP; pulmonary arterial embolism, PAE

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frequently performed at intensive care units (ICUs). However, smaller hospitals are not necessarily equipped with ICUs and young registrars frequently had not undergone echocardiographic training yet. Furthermore, the assessment of echocardiography can be limited with difficult anatomic conditions or obesity. For this reason, further non-skill-dependent tests appear to be reasonable, especially when echocardiography is limited by the staff present, for example, at nighttime. Natriuretic peptides have traditionally been used as markers for heart failure.\textsuperscript{7} Plasma brain natriuretic peptide (BNP), which is released from ventricular myocytes upon stretching, has been reported to allow differentiating between pulmonary and cardiac disease-related dyspnoea. Additionally, elevated plasma BNP\textsuperscript{10, 11} and troponin\textsuperscript{12, 13} levels have also been reported in patients with APE in non-perioperative settings.

Owing to the known limitations of D-dimers in patients who underwent major surgery, we assessed the predictive value of plasma N-terminal (NT)-proBNP and troponin I levels in the detection of post-surgical APE.

Methods

With approval of the ethical committee of the University of Ulm, Germany, 44 patients [age 62 yr (SD 14); range 30–93 yr] with suspected APE were investigated by laboratory values and CT scan. The study has been registered at clinicaltrials.gov (ID: NCT01633671). All patients underwent major abdominal surgery before their ICU stay. The routine laboratory workup at Ulm University surgical ICU in the case of suspected APE consisted of D-dimers as a traditional marker of PE and also NT-proBNP and troponin-I for cardiac differential diagnosis. The blood samples were obtained within 30–60 min after the onset of clinical symptoms. D-dimer levels were assessed by a Latex-augmented immunoturbidimetric test on a Behring Coagulation System analyser (Siemens Healthcare Diagnostics GmbH, Eschborn, Germany) and troponin-I levels by an fluorescence enzyme immunoassay: Tosoh Bioscience AIA21 (Tosoh Bioscience, Tokyo, Japan). NT-proBNP was analysed with an Electro Chemi Luminescence Immuno Assay (ECLIAss) using a Roche MODULAR ANALYTICS E170 (Elecys Modul) immunoassay device (F. Hoffmann-La Roche AG, Basel, Switzerland).

The consecutive reference values were used: NT-proBNP: Table 1; troponin I: <0.07 \( \mu \text{g litre}^{-1} \); D-dimers: <160 \( \mu \text{g litre}^{-1} \).

A CT scan of the thorax with contrast agent was performed in all patients for definitive confirmation or exclusion of APE. In the present study at our university hospital, the laboratory assessment of NT-proBNP and troponin I was compared with a CT scan as the CT with contrast agent is expected to be the diagnostic gold-standard in APE.

Echocardiography was not performed as a part of this study to simulate conditions in smaller hospitals which are frequently unable to do so at nighttime due to a lack of staff experienced in this field (e.g. resident/consultant in the theatre, registrar had not undergone echocardiographic training yet).

Statistics

Laboratory values were tested for normal distribution by the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test. Additionally, the quotient of measured NT-proBNP and upper NT-proBNP reference value was calculated. Differences in laboratory values between patients with proof of APE in the CT scan and those without were assessed by the Mann–Whitney \( U \)-tests. Furthermore, the sensitivity, specificity, positive predictive value, and negative predictive value of NT-proBNP were calculated. The upper reference value (depending on age and gender) was used as the cut-off value for positive NT-proBNP screening.

Results

APE was confirmed by CT scan in 28 patients and excluded in 16 patients. D-dimer levels were distributed normally, while NP-proBNP and troponin-I levels were not. The Mann–Whitney \( U \)-tests were used for further analysis. NT-proBNP levels were significantly higher in subjects with APE compared with those without (Table 2). Furthermore, troponin-I levels were significantly increased. In contrast, there was no significant difference in plasma D-dimer levels between subjects with APE and those without. The four-fold-table of reliability testing is presented in Table 3. The sensitivity of the NT-proBNP screening was 93\%, specificity 63\%, positive predictive value 81\%, and negative predictive value 83\%. Troponin-I levels were not increased in nine of 28 patients with APE (32\%).

Discussion

Several previous studies investigated the role of natriuretic peptides in the context of lung embolism, consecutive right heart failure, and mortality in non-surgical patients. These studies revealed increased BNP levels to be an adverse prognostic parameter in pulmonary embolism as well.\textsuperscript{15–17} However, the diagnostic value of BNP has not been investigated yet, most likely because there is no need to do so in the non-surgical patient, since D-dimers are valuable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Normal ranges of NT-proBNP. The gender- and age-dependent reference values for NT-proBNP are given</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (yr)</td>
<td>Normal range (pg ml(^{-1}))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19–44</td>
<td>&lt;130</td>
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<tr>
<td>45–54</td>
<td>&lt;249</td>
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<td>&lt;738</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>&lt;86</td>
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<td>&gt;74</td>
<td>&lt;486</td>
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those without APE. The increase in NT-proBNP levels is not covered by this screening test.

In the present study, six patients without CT-angiographic confirmation of APE presented elevated NT-proBNP levels. However, four patients showed high inflammation parameters and two had a pre-existing renal injury according to the RIFLE criteria. This observation confirms previous reports that increased BNP and NT-proBNP levels may also occur in acute ill patients due to systemic inflammatory response syndrome, sepsis or septic shock, acute renal failure, and others.20–24 In these patients, the specificity of elevated plasma NT-proBNP levels appears to be reduced for this reason which limits the predictive value of NT-proBNP in the detection of APE. Since heart tissue can be damaged by the inflammation process in sepsis, troponin levels can be increased in sepsis.25 This limits the predictive value of troponins for the detection of APE in septic patients as well.

In the present study, it appears to be more alarming that two patients with proven APE did not show increased levels of NT-proBNP (63 and 333 pg ml\(^{-1}\)). When taking into account that these two patients were only affected by minor peripheral embolies, it is not surprising that cardiac workload was not increased enough to result in an elevation of NT-proBNP. Consequently, NT-proBNP does only appear to be a proper way to differentiate right- from left-heart-stress, even though the muscle mass of the right ventricle is smaller. The increased cardiac workload and stretch associated with APE appears to result in a damage of myocardial cells resulting in an increase in troponin-I levels. Increased troponin levels have been reported to be associated with a higher mortality in patients with APE.12,13 Patients with elevated serum troponin I levels are at a higher risk for the development of right ventricular dysfunction and cardiogenic shock consecutive to pulmonary embolism.19

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While NT-proBNP was a good indicator of clinically relevant APE, the use of troponin-I on its own cannot be recommended, since troponin-I levels were normal in 32% of the patients with APE.

Since D-dimer concentrations are not valuable in the post-operative setting, measurement of plasma NT-proBNP concentrations may further confirm suspected APE under conditions of otherwise unexplained haemodynamic instability, acute deterioration of pulmonary gas exchange, or both. However neither NT-proBNP nor troponin I levels facilitate the distinction between APE and myocardial infarction since natriuretic peptides are frequently increased in myocardial infarction as well.26

In the detection of APE, the assessment of NT-proBNP levels might be particularly helpful in smaller hospitals.
without CT scan devices or without staff to run these devices at nighttime. Based on our present results, an NT-proBNP-based screening strategy might help to decide whether to transfer post-surgical patients to larger hospitals. CT scans or echocardiography can be performed at these larger hospitals to confirm or exclude APE. The patients should preferably be transferred to a hospital with a cardiology department and coronary care unit since myocardial infarction remains a potential differential diagnosis of APE. In the case of NT-proBNP and troponin levels below the upper reference value, both, myocardial infarction and haemodynamically relevant APE, are unlikely and problems other than these should be taken into account. Relevant APE is possible if NT-proBNP levels are elevated. However, sepsis or impaired renal function might result in false-positive values. The general value of NT-proBNP in the surgical patient appears to be similar to the value D-dimers in the non-surgical setting: APE is unlikely if laboratory results are negative, but positive results do not necessarily mean that APE is present. Neither NT-proBNP nor D-dimers are able to replace CT scans or echocardiography to obtain definitive results. Studies in larger populations are urgently required to verify the predictive value of NT-proBNP and troponin I for the diagnosis of APE in the surgical patient.

Declaration of interest
None declared.

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