Ischemic Core and Penumbra in Human Stroke

Anthony M. Kaufmann, MD, MSc, FRCSC; Andrew D. Firlik, MD; Melanie B. Fukui, MD; Lawrence R. Wechsler, MD; Charles A. Jungrics, MD; Howard Yonas, MD

Background and Purpose—The ischemic core and penumbra have not been thoroughly characterized after acute cerebral thromboembolic occlusion in humans. Differentiation between areas of potentially viable and irreversibly injured ischemic tissue may facilitate assessment and treatment of stroke patients.

Methods—Cerebral blood flow (CBF) was measured in 20 patients with acute middle cerebral artery (MCA) occlusion between 60 and 360 minutes after stroke onset, with the stable xenon computerized tomography (CT) technique. Threshold displays were generated at a single level, and the percentages of hemisphere with CBF ≤6, 6 to 10, 11 to 20, 21 to 30, and >30 cm³·100 g⁻¹·min⁻¹ were measured. The corresponding images on 12 available follow-up CT scans were similarly assessed to determine the area of final infarct. Comparisons were analyzed with a paired Student’s t test and Pearson’s correlation coefficient.

Results—Discrete and confluent areas of CBF ≤20 cm³·100 g⁻¹·min⁻¹ were identified in all patients, ipsilateral to the symptomatic MCA territory. The average area of CBF ≤20 cm³·100 g⁻¹·min⁻¹ within the ipsilateral hemisphere was 66±17% compared with 36±12% contralaterally (P<0.001). A difference in the extent of low CBF was due primarily to areas with CBF ≤10 cm³·100 g⁻¹·min⁻¹ (48±18% versus 16±7%, P<0.001). The area of most severe ipsilateral ischemia (≤6 cm³·100 g⁻¹·min⁻¹) best corresponded to the final area of infarction (37±18% versus 40±24%; correlation coefficient, 0.866; P<0.01). The acute ischemic core destined to infarction was not surrounded by a widened rim of moderate ischemia because the area with CBF 11 to 20 cm³·100 g⁻¹·min⁻¹ was similar bilaterally (19±4% versus 20±7%, P=0.792, thus not significant).

Conclusions—Our study in acute human stroke involving MCA occlusion indicates that a severely ischemic core (CBF ≤6 cm³·100 g⁻¹·min⁻¹), observed between 1 to 6 hours after stroke onset, corresponds to the cerebral tissue destined to infarction. The ischemic penumbra with flow values between 7 and 20 cm³·100 g⁻¹·min⁻¹ surrounding the ischemic core is very narrow. Therefore, strategies to improve the outcome of many patients with acute MCA occlusion must either include interventions to reverse the ischemic process within a few minutes of onset or increase the cerebral tolerance of ischemia and thereby prolong the potential therapeutic window. (Stroke. 1999;30:93-99.)

Key Words: cerebral blood flow • cerebral infarction • cerebral ischemia • penumbra • tomography, emission computed

The current goal of acute stroke therapy is to protect cerebral tissue before development of irreversible injury. A transition from reversible to irreversible injury is dependent primarily on the severity and duration of ischemia. Efforts to reestablish tissue perfusion in a timely fashion are therefore expected to be beneficial. Indeed, human studies of thrombolysis have shown improved outcome for carefully selected patients compared with placebo-treated control subjects. However, these studies have not identified a reduction in size of infarction because there has been no pretreatment delineation of the tissue at risk. Furthermore, clinical and computerized tomographic (CT) findings do not reflect the extent or severity of acute cerebral ischemia. To better evaluate acute stroke interventions, it is necessary to establish imaging techniques that demonstrate the therapeutic target and differentiate this from areas of already established infarction.

Experimental data have demonstrated a gradual progression of a reversible degree of ischemia toward infarction. A central core with severely compromised cerebral blood flow (CBF) is thought to be surrounded by a rim of moderate ischemic tissue with impaired electrical activity but preserved cellular metabolism and viability. This “penumbra” has a variable outcome, and tissue salvage may be achieved when reperfusion is established within a 6- to 8-hour period. Positron emission tomography (PET) studies have also demonstrated a gradual reduction in cerebral metabolic activity within regions of acute focal ischemia. Retained cerebral metabolism has been demonstrated for ≥17 hours in severely ischemic areas that subsequently progress to infarc-

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tion. However, such cellular activity does not necessarily indicate functional viability. Indeed, tissue injury in the severely ischemic core may progress to infarction within 1 to 2 hours. 

Although PET imaging has greatly increased our understanding of the stroke process, its availability and practicality in acute clinical settings are limited. There is a need to establish readily available imaging techniques that may delineate the extent and severity of cerebral ischemia during the first minutes and hours after stroke onset. Such data may define the areas of brain destined to infarction and distinguish potentially viable tissue at risk (ie, therapeutic target). Delineation of this tissue will facilitate evaluation of future treatments. Management decisions may then be individualized among the inhomogeneous group of acute stroke victims.

In the present study, we examine quantitative measurements of CBF in the first 6 hours after middle cerebral artery (MCA) territory stroke onset in humans. The extent and severity of ischemia were determined and compared with the final area of infarction. These data characterize the ischemic core and penumbra and support the concept of an ischemic threshold in human stroke.

**Subjects and Methods**

We retrospectively reviewed a consecutive series of patients with MCA ischemic stroke who underwent quantitative CBF measurements within 6 hours of stroke onset. A precise onset time was necessary for patient inclusion; therefore, individuals who awoke with stroke symptoms were excluded. Patients were also excluded if preliminary conventional CT scans demonstrated intracranial hemorrhage, mass lesion, or early CT evidence of infarction over one third of the affected MCA territory. Therefore, all these patients were potential candidates for thrombolytic interventions. Although none received intravenous thrombolytic therapy, all were initially assessed as potential candidates for an institutional intra-arterial thrombolysis (IATL) protocol with urokinase within the first 6 hours of acute MCA stroke presentation. However, therapeutic decisions regarding the use of IATL in the present series of patients were made at the discretion of the attending stroke neurologist or neurosurgeon independently of the acute CBF imaging results (Table 1).

**Xenon-Enhanced CT CBF Technique**

Xenon-enhanced CT (XeCT) is a quantitative CBF imaging technique with a high degree of sensitivity and spatial resolution. Its accuracy has been validated against other quantitative CBF techniques, including radiolabeled microspheres, $^{113}$Xe, and iodoantipyrine CBF techniques. Previous investigations have determined that the normal CBF in human mixed cortical tissue is $50 \pm 20$.

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Table 2. Stable XeCT CBF Measurements in 12 Patients With Acute MCA Occlusion and Final CT Scan-Defined Infarct

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient</th>
<th>Acute CBF Ranges</th>
<th>Follow-Up CT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0–6,* cm³/100 g⁻¹/min⁻¹</td>
<td>Infarct* Day†</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>SD</td>
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*Areas given as percent of hemisphere.
†Interval between stroke presentation and follow-up CT scan.

Analysis of XeCT Measurements

The CBF data obtained at 60 to 360 minutes after stroke onset and before any therapeutic interventions were analyzed by means of the XeCT computerized program. Analysis was limited to the middle cerebral circulation. Side-to-side asymmetries of CBF were also variable and dependent on the extent of this severe ischemia (48±18% ipsilaterally versus 16±7% contralaterally, P<0.001). There was a homogeneous distribution of CBF 11 to 20 cm³/100 g⁻¹/min⁻¹ that corresponded to the sulcal and hemispheric deep white matter, and this area was similar bilaterally in all 20 patients (19±4% versus 20±7%, P=0.792). There was, however, no widened rim of such “moderate ischemia” surrounding the ischemic core (Figure 1).

Acute CBF Versus Infarct Area

The extent of infarction was measured in patients 1 through 12 from CT scans obtained between 2 and 41 days after initial presentation (Figure 2). In these patients, significant correlations were found between the extent of severe cerebral ischemia of ≤6 or 10 cm³/100 g⁻¹-min⁻¹ and the final area of infarction, with Pearson correlation coefficients of 0.866.
and 0.901, respectively ($P<0.01$). The area of infarction was not measured in patients 13 through 15, who developed post-IATL hemorrhages, and no follow-up CT scans were available for patients 16 through 20. However, the distribution of severe ischemia and surrounding moderate CBF reductions did not differ between these groups.

The ischemic core $\leq 6 \text{ cm}^3 \cdot 100 \text{ g}^{-1} \cdot \text{min}^{-1}$ most closely correlated to the area of final infarction and never overestimated the infarct by $>10\%$ (Figure 3). In patient 4, the final infarct was significantly more extensive than the initial CBF measurements would have predicted, which may have resulted from secondary ischemic insults after the initial XeCT. Initial CT scans free of early lucency or swelling did not correspond to the duration of symptoms or extent of final infarction. The extent of final infarction was also not appreciably influenced by the IATL interventions (Figure 3).

**Discussion**

Development of cerebral infarction depends primarily on the duration and severity of ischemia. Although there are few data on the acute quantitative CBF in human stroke, experimental studies have shown that severe ischemia produces infarction within 1 hour. Yonas et al\textsuperscript{41,42} demonstrated that selective occlusion of the lenticulostriate arteries in baboons reduced CBF to $<8 \text{ cm}^3 \cdot 100 \text{ g}^{-1} \cdot \text{min}^{-1}$, which consistently produced infarction of the involved territory after 60 minutes. Others have also demonstrated that a CBF threshold in the first hour of cerebral ischemia is predictive of infarction.\textsuperscript{1,33,34} A threshold for cerebral viability has also been suggested by the results of PET studies that demonstrate infarction of all tissue with cerebral metabolic rate $<1.5 \text{ cm}^3 \cdot 100 \text{ g}^{-1} \cdot \text{min}^{-1}$.\textsuperscript{34,43,44} Recently, Touho and Karasawa\textsuperscript{30} showed with XeCT in humans that CBF $<9 \text{ cm}^3 \cdot 100 \text{ g}^{-1} \cdot \text{min}^{-1}$ at 2 hours...
after stroke onset was associated with infarction. However, the extent of severe ischemia was not compared with follow-up CT scan–defined infarction. Our findings indicated that the extent of severe ischemia corresponds to the final infarct. The present study has some limitations, including the retrospective nature, variable intervals between follow-up CT scans, and analysis at a single level. However, the statistically significant correlations between areas with CBF ≤6 cm³·100 g⁻¹·min⁻¹ measured between 140 and 360 minutes and the final infarct suggest that quantitative XeCT may be a powerful tool to delineate the ischemic core in acute human stroke.

Astrup et al. described the ischemic penumbra as an area of moderate cerebral ischemia with reduced electrical activity that still maintained a membrane function and therefore was potentially viable. Neurological deficits may be reversed in penumbral tissue when normal CBF is reestablished within 6 to 8 hours. Although medical diagrams often depict a substantial rim of penumbral cerebral tissue surrounding the ischemic core, the extent of such potentially reversible cerebral ischemia has not been well characterized in human stroke. Our quantitative CBF measurements between 60 and 360 minutes demonstrated no widened rim of moderate ischemia (7 to 20 cm³·mg⁻¹·min⁻¹) around the well-delineated ischemic core at risk for infarction. These observations were consistent at 60 and 360 minutes, suggesting that the core of irreversible ischemic injury may be determined very early in the course of acute stroke.

It is not surprising that attempted IATL did not beneficially influence the relationship between the acute ischemic core and final infarct (Figure 3). Although these interventions were usually initiated >2 hours after stroke onset, the acute CBF measurement results suggest that the early extent of severe ischemia defines the final extent of infarction. Therefore, the actual therapeutic window probably is <1 to 2 hours, and hyperacute interventions are needed to reduce infarct volume. Such treatments may include agents to facilitate reperfusion and increase cerebral tolerance to ischemia.
Conclusions

Acute measurements of CBF are necessary to delineate the extent and severity of cerebral ischemia in human stroke patients. Quantitative techniques such as XeCT have the capacity to accurately predict the area of irreversible ischemic injury at risk for infarction and facilitate the evaluation of stroke interventions. The preliminary results provided in this report suggest that the severely ischemic core established in the first hours after acute MCA occlusion in humans is destined to infarct. Furthermore, the surrounding ischemic penumbra is narrow. Therefore, hyperacute interventions to facilitate reperfusion or neural protection are necessary to limit the extent of infarction.

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References


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