Collateral Variations in Circle of Willis in Atherosclerotic Population Assessed by Means of Transcranial Color-Coded Duplex Ultrasonography

A.W.J. Hoksbergen, MD; D.A. Legemate, MD, PhD; D.T. Ubbink, MD, PhD; M.J.H.M. Jacobs, MD, PhD

Background and Purpose—Transcranial color-coded duplex ultrasonography combined with common carotid artery (CCA) compression can be used to assess the collateral function of the circle of Willis. The aim of this study was to assess the unknown fraction of hemodynamic functional anterior and posterior communicating arteries (AcoA and PcoA, respectively) in an atherosclerotic population with no cerebrovascular symptoms.

Methods—In 76 patients with a mean age of 61 (35 to 89) years, the blood flow velocity changes in the precommunicating parts (A1 and P1, respectively) of the anterior and posterior cerebral arteries were measured during CCA compression. The AcoA was defined as functional if blood flow was reversed in the ipsilateral A1 and enhanced in the contralateral A1 during CCA compression. The PcoA was defined as functional if the flow velocity in the P1 was enhanced >20% during ipsilateral CCA compression.

Results—It was possible to assess cross flow through the anterior part of the circle of Willis in 95% of the subjects. Failure of this collateral pathway was caused by a hypofunctional AcoA in 4% and a hypofunctional A1 in 1% of the subjects. Anomalies in the posterior part of the circle of Willis hampering collateral flow from the basilar to the internal carotid artery were found in 45% of the hemispheres. Thirty-eight percent of PcoAs were hypofunctional, and 7% of the posterior cerebral arteries had a persistent fetal anatomy.

Conclusions—We found that in subjects with no cerebrovascular symptoms, the anterior collateral pathway of the circle of Willis was nearly always functional. In contrast, the posterior collateral pathway was nonfunctional in almost half of the total number of hemispheres. Comparing these basic data with data from patients with cerebral ischemic disease might further help to elucidate the importance of the collateral capacity of the circle of Willis. (Stroke. 2000;31:1656-1660.)

Key Words: cerebral arteries ■ collateral circulation ■ hemodynamics ■ ultrasonography, Doppler, duplex

Many anatomic1–4 and radiological5–7 studies involving the configuration of the circle of Willis (Figure 1) in subjects with no cerebrovascular disease have been published, with special emphasis on the integrity of the collateral vessels. However, assessment of the true collateral potential of the circle of Willis requires the use of common carotid artery (CCA) compression tests to simulate carotid occlusion. With transcranial color-coded duplex ultrasonography (TCCD), the real-time reaction of the intracranial circulation to the CCA compression can be examined. Basic knowledge of the hemodynamic integrity of the circle of Willis is important because a correlation between anomalies of the circle of Willis (occurring in 50% to 80% of individuals)2,4,8 and stroke risk has been shown.4,9–14

Data on the hemodynamic potential of the circle of Willis in subjects without cerebrovascular symptoms are largely lacking. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to establish the range of collateral variations in the circle of Willis as determined by TCCD and CCA compression tests in atherosclerotic subjects without cerebrovascular symptoms.

Subjects and Methods

Subjects

Ninety-nine atherosclerotic patients (67 men and 32 women) with a mean age of 61 (range 35 to 89) years who were being evaluated for peripheral vascular disease were recruited from the vascular surgical outpatient clinic. Patients with cerebrovascular symptoms were not included. The study was approved by the local ethics committee, and written informed consent was obtained from each patient.

Assessment of Functional Intracranial Collaterals

For all ultrasound examinations, a Hewlett Packard SONOS 2000 duplex scanner was used. Duplex scanning of the extracranial arteries supplying the brain (4.5- to 5.5-MHz transducer) preceded transcranial investigation. Patients with significant stenoses (peak
systolic velocity [PSV] >1.25 m/s) or occlusions of the internal carotid artery (ICA) or vertebral arteries were excluded to rule out any possible influence on the enlarging of collateral pathways.15 TCCD was performed by use of a low-frequency (2.0- to 2.5-MHz) transducer. Insonation of the main trunk of the middle cerebral artery and the precommunicating parts (A1 and P1, respectively) of the anterior and posterior cerebral arteries through the temporal window was performed in the standard manner, the details of which are reported elsewhere.16,17 In the case of unilateral window failure, investigation of the A1 and P1 through the opposite temporal window was attempted. A routine transcranial examination also included insonation of the vertebrobasilar arteries through the foramen magnum, but these data are not considered for further analysis here.

For reliable assessment of the functional patency of the anterior and posterior communicating artery (AcoA and PcoA, respectively), CCA compression tests are required.18,19 Collateral supply through the AcoA was demonstrated by reversal of blood flow in the A1 segment of the anterior cerebral artery ipsilateral to the compressed CCA, combined with an enhanced blood flow velocity in the contralateral A1 (Figure 2). Both A1 segments were routinely investigated by use of ipsilateral and contralateral CCA compression. Functional patency of the PcoA was defined by a PSV increase of >20% in the P1 segment of the posterior cerebral artery during ipsilateral CCA compression (Figure 2), with this value being twice as much as expected from normal variation and measurement error.11,19 The PSV increase was always measured over the highest peaks on the Doppler spectrum. If the PSV increase in the P1 was <20%, the PcoA was defined as hypofunctional. In the case of a fetal posterior cerebral artery, the main stem of the posterior cerebral artery arises from the ICA instead of from the basilar artery. In such cases, the PcoA, which is now the main stem of the posterior cerebral artery, is enlarged and is accompanied by a thin or hypoplastic P1. Such a large PcoA can be detected by TCCD, enabling direct velocity measurements. If ipsilateral CCA compression caused a velocity decrease in the PcoA instead of flow reversal, then the P1 was defined as hypofunctional. To avoid artifacts due to turbulence near the origins of the communicating arteries on provoking collateral flow, velocity measurements were taken proximally in the A1 and P1 with the sample volume set as narrowly as possible.

Compressions of the CCA were applied for 3 to 5 cardiac cycles, low in the neck just proximal to the sternal head of the clavicle, to avoid a systemic cardiovascular reaction. To minimize the risk of embolus, compressions were performed only in those patients with no atherosclerotic plaques in the proximal CCA, as judged by the B-mode image of the duplex scan. To ensure the efficacy of the compression, a photoplethysmograph that generated pulse tracings on a separate monitor was attached to the earlobe on the side of the compressed artery. Flattening of this pulse wave indicated cessation of blood flow through the CCA and, thus, an adequate compression. To assess the collateral function of the AcoA and PcoA, a minimum of 3 compressions of both CCAs was needed.

Results

General

From the initial 99 patients, we were finally able to determine the patency of the collateral vessels in 76. The reasons for exclusion are listed in Table 1. No ischemic complications of carotid compression occurred. Adverse reactions were local pain at the site of compression and coughing due to irritation of the trachea during compression. In patients with large necks and deeply located carotid arteries and in patients with very high systolic blood pressure, the CCA had to be firmly compressed to stop blood flow. One patient noted a shooting pain in the ipsilateral shoulder and arm during compression, which was probably due to stimulation of the brachiocephalic plexus. In another patient, compression caused a short-lasting bradycardia, probably caused by compression too close to the carotid sinus. In 9 women and 2 men, we were unable to visualize the intracranial arteries because of unsuitable tem-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1. Excluded Patients</th>
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<tr>
<td>No. of Patients</td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial patients, N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluded patients, n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICA stenosis &gt;50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICA occlusion</td>
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<tr>
<td>VA occlusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCA plaques</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unsuitable temporal windows</td>
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<tr>
<td>Remaining patients, n</td>
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poral bone windows, a well-known problem of transcranial ultrasound investigations, particularly in elderly women. 20 –22

Collateral Variations
In Figure 3, the collateral variations of the circle of Willis with frequency of occurrence are shown. In 22 (29%) of the patients, the AcoA and both PcoAs were functionally patent, resulting in a hemodynamically complete circle of Willis. In none of the patients could the AcoA be visualized in the physiological state, and visualization could not be determined during CCA compression. Cross flow through the anterior part of the circle of Willis during CCA compression was not established for only 4 (5%) of the patients. This was due to the absence of a functional AcoA in 3 patients and a hypofunctional A1 segment in 1 patient. Although the latter had excellent temporal bone windows and a very well-developed A1 on one side, we could not visualize the A1 on the opposite side. Ipsilateral CCA compression caused cessation of blood flow in the visible A1 segment. In the other 3 patients with no anterior cross flow, we could clearly visualize and take velocity measurements in both A1 segments; therefore, we assumed that a hypofunctional AcoA was the reason for the absence of collateral flow.

We were able to visualize 13% of the functional PcoAs. In all of these PcoAs, an antegrade flow from the ICA to the posterior cerebral artery was detected, which reversed during ipsilateral CCA compression. Unilateral hypofunctional PcoAs were found in 34 (22%) of the hemispheres, and bilateral hypofunctional PcoAs were found in 12 (16%) of the patients. In 10 (7%) of the hemispheres, persistence of the fetal origin of the posterior cerebral artery was found. In Table 2, the precompression and postcompression velocities in the ipsilateral and contralateral A1 and ipsilateral P1 in cases of functional AcoA and PcoAs are shown. The median PSV enhancement during CCA compression was significantly higher in the A1 segments than in the P1 segments (P<0.001, Mann-Whitney U test). The 90% central range of the postcompression velocities is very wide for both A1 and P1 segments, reflecting the large spread of the collateral capacity.

Discussion
Because of the obvious role of the AcoAs and PcoAs in preventing neurological damage from obstructive cerebrovascular disease,11–14 methods of determining their collateral potential are currently much in discussion.5–7,23,24 We found a functional AcoA in 95% of an atherosclerotic population with no cerebrovascular disease. Anomalies in the posterior part of the circle of Willis hampering collateral flow from the basilar artery to the ICA were found in 45% of the hemispheres. Because of the character of the present study, we could not confirm our findings by angiography. Comparative studies between transcranial ultrasound combined with CCA compression and angiography in patients with cerebrovascular disease showed that transcranial ultrasound has a high level of sensitivity and specificity in detecting AcoA and PcoA patency.23–25 However, it should be noted that these studies were performed in patients with carotid artery obstructive disease and that patients with insufficient collateral capacity were probably underrepresented because the severity of their stroke precluded inclusion in the study. The AcoA is commonly recognized as the most important collateral pathway in the event of severe ICA stenosis or occlusion.13,26 –29 The importance of a functional PcoA in ICA obstructive disease is not yet clear, although a hypoplastic PcoA might increase the risk of developing cerebral ischemia in patients with ICA occlusion.12

Table 2. PSV Changes in the Presence of a Functionally Patent AcoA or PcoA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Velocities</th>
<th>Ipsilateral A1</th>
<th>Contralateral A1</th>
<th>Ipsilateral P1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Precompression, cm/s</td>
<td>80 (50–127)</td>
<td>84 (54–131)</td>
<td>60 (37–83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postcompression, cm/s</td>
<td>97 (27–200)*</td>
<td>166 (96–261)</td>
<td>91 (53–214)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase, cm/s</td>
<td>86% (38–237)†</td>
<td>47% (23–319)†</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Velocities and velocity increases are given as medians with 5th and 95th percentiles.
*Reversed blood flow velocities.
†P<0.001 by Wilcoxon signed-rank test.

Figure 3. Schematic drawings of the collateral variations found in the circle of Willis in the present study. Numbers and percentages of patients are shown in parentheses for the following conditions: A, complete circle; B, hypofunctional right PcoA; C, hypofunctional left PcoA; D, bilateral hypofunctional PcoAs; E, fetal right posterior cerebral artery; F, fetal left posterior cerebral artery; G, hypofunctional left PcoA and fetal right posterior cerebral artery; H, hypofunctional right PcoA and fetal left posterior cerebral artery; I, hypofunctional AcoA; J, hypofunctional AcoA and hypofunctional left PcoA; and K, hypoplasia right A1 and hypofunctional right PcoA. R indicates right; L, left.
In Table 3, the state of the collateral vessels as found by anatomic, ultrasound, and magnetic resonance (MR) angiography studies is reported. Our findings resemble the results from anatomic studies in normal control subjects, particularly with regard to the anterior collateral pathway. With respect to the posterior collateral pathway, more variability between studies was found. This is most likely caused by the different criteria used in the anatomic studies for the definition of a hypoplastic PcoA. Unfortunately, the patient numbers of the transcranial Doppler studies are too small to make a reliable comparison with our data.19,30

Moreover, TCCD is considered a technique superior to conventional transcranial Doppler when exact measurements in small arterial segments are required.16,31,32

It is of interest to compare our findings with the results of MR angiography, another new noninvasive technique for establishing the collateral integrity of the circle of Willis. 5–7 A striking difference appears in the detection and assessment of AcoA function with the studies of Stock et al6 and Krabbe-Hartkamp et al7 (Table 3). A much higher frequency of AcoA hypoplasia is found in these studies than in our own anatomic, ultrasound, and magnetic resonance (MR) angiographic studies. For instance, 4% of AcoA hypoplasia was found in the study of Stock et al6 and 0% in the study of Krabbe-Hartkamp et al7, whereas in our own anatomic, ultrasound, and magnetic resonance (MR) angiographic studies, the frequency of AcoA hypoplasia was 5% (Table 3). This technical difference might also be explained by the different criteria used in the anatomic studies for the definition of a hypoplastic AcoA. Unfortunately, the patient numbers of the transcranial Doppler studies are too small to make a reliable comparison with our data.19,30

In our study, we found that in atherosclerotic subjects with no cerebrovascular symptoms, the anterior collateral pathway of the circle of Willis is nearly always functional as opposed to the posterior collateral pathway, which is nonfunctional in almost half of the hemispheres. TCCD probably gives a more reliable insight into the collateral ability of the circle of Willis than does MR angiography or conventional angiography because of the triggering of collateral flow with carotid compression tests. Furthermore, it is a relatively inexpensive and simple technique, which makes it an attractive method of studying intracranial hemodynamics. Comparing our basic data with data from patients with cerebral ischemic symptoms might further help to elucidate the importance of the collateral capacity of the circle of Willis. In summary, we showed that in atherosclerotic subjects with no cerebrovascular symptoms, the anterior collateral pathway of the circle of Willis is nearly always functional as opposed to the posterior collateral pathway, which is nonfunctional in almost half of the hemispheres. TCCD probably gives a more reliable insight into the collateral ability of the circle of Willis than does MR angiography or conventional angiography because of the triggering of collateral flow with carotid compression tests. Furthermore, it is a relatively inexpensive and simple technique, which makes it an attractive method of studying intracranial hemodynamics. Comparing our basic data with data from patients with cerebral ischemic symptoms might further help to elucidate the importance of the collateral capacity of the circle of Willis. In summary, we showed that in atherosclerotic subjects with no cerebrovascular symptoms, the anterior collateral pathway of the circle of Willis is nearly always functional as opposed to the posterior collateral pathway, which is nonfunctional in almost half of the hemispheres. TCCD probably gives a more reliable insight into the collateral ability of the circle of Willis than does MR angiography or conventional angiography because of the triggering of collateral flow with carotid compression tests. Furthermore, it is a relatively inexpensive and simple technique, which makes it an attractive method of studying intracranial hemodynamics. Comparing our basic data with data from patients with cerebral ischemic symptoms might further help to elucidate the importance of the collateral capacity of the circle of Willis.
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References
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