Flow Diversion for Intracranial Aneurysms
A Review

Pietro I. D’Urso, MD; Giuseppe Lanzino, MD; Harry J. Cloft, MD, PhD; David F. Kallmes, MD

Abstract—The introduction of flow diverters for treatment of intracranial aneurysms represents a major paradigm shift in the treatment of these lesions. The theoretical hallmark of flow diverters is the treatment of the diseased segment harboring the aneurysm instead of treating the aneurysm itself. Flow diverters are designed to induce disruption of flow near the aneurysm neck while preserving flow into parent vessel and adjacent branches. After flow diversion, intra-aneurysmal thrombosis occurs, followed by shrinkage of the aneurysmal sac as the thrombus organizes and retracts. Preliminary clinical series document effective treatment of wide-neck and/or large and giant aneurysms with acceptable complication rates. However, several questions remain unanswered related to the incidence and mechanisms of aneurysm rupture after treatment with flow diverters, fate of small perforating vessels, and long-term patency rates. (Stroke. 2011;42: 2363-2368.)

Key Words: flow disruption • flow diverters • intracranial aneurysms

With the approval of detachable coils in 1995, endovascular treatment of intracranial aneurysms has become an alternative to surgical clip ligation. Despite the introduction of “modified” coils and advanced techniques such as stent-assisted and balloon-assisted coiling, coil embolization has major limitations because of inability to completely and permanently occlude all aneurysms. The risks of incomplete treatment and recurrence are higher in complex large and giant aneurysms. As stents were being developed for intracranial use,1–4 it was hypothesized that stents could be utilized to divert flow “away” from the aneurysm “back” into the parent vessel, and the concept of “endovascular flow diversion” was proposed. Early in vitro and in vivo studies showed this concept to be valid, but clinical application was limited because of high porosity of first-generation intracranial stents. With technological improvements, intracranial flow diverters have become available for endoluminal parent vessel reconstruction and early clinical experiences have been encouraging.

Flow diverters induce disruption of flow near the aneurysm neck, inducing thrombosis into the aneurysmal sac while preserving physiological flow in the parent vessel and adjacent branches (Figures 1 and 2). The development of flow diverters represents a classical example of technological evolution from a theoretical concept based on in vitro models, confirmed by experimental animal studies and eventually applied in clinical practice. In this review, we trace the development of flow diverters and summarize early clinical experiences with particular emphasis on complications encountered.

Flow Diverters: Evolution of a Concept
The concept of flow diversion comes from observations of intra-aneurysmal flow patterns in in vitro models of stented intracranial aneurysms using laser-induced fluorescence and particle image velocimetry. These studies suggested that placement of a stent across the aneurysm alters intra-aneurysmal flow patterns redirecting flow away from the aneurysm and back into the parent artery.5–8 Experimental studies paralleled in vitro studies and confirmed the validity of the theoretical concepts discussed.9–11 Wakhloo et al10 demonstrated in a canine aneurysm model the feasibility of placing first-generation stents across experimental aneurysms in small arteries with resultant aneurysm occlusion, long-term stent patency, and absence of thromboembolic complications. Furthermore, they showed that a neointimal layer grew on the inner surface of stent with asymmetrical pattern of growth, probably reflecting local differences in wall shear stress.12 Early clinical experiences demonstrated the ability of newly designed stents to navigate the tortuosity of the intracranial circulation and paved the way to a “new era” in the treatment of intracranial aneurysms.3 However, because of the high porosity of early available devices, the flow-diverting effect was limited and stents were used mostly as a scaffold to support endovascular coils in the treatment of wide-neck aneurysms.1,2

Further theoretical in vitro studies suggested that stent porosity and local hydrodynamic conditions play an important role in uncoupling flow between the parent vessel and the aneurysmal sac.5–8 Porosity is the most common metrics used to quantify the amount of “coverage” with the metallic
implant in a stent; it is defined as the area percentage of metal over the neck. Another important metric is the “pore density,” defined as the number of pores per area. Lower porosity and increased pore density are design goals for devices aimed at occluding aneurysms. Using low-porosity stents, a reduction up to 90% of the original flow inside the aneurysmal sac was observed.6,13,14 Computational fluid dynamics studies confirmed the efficacy of low-porosity stents in pursuing intraaneurysmal flow disruption.13,15 These studies also clarified the role of parent vessel geometry, demonstrating that flow reduction is more significant in side wall aneurysms (in which shear-driven flow is dominant) than in aneurysms located on a curve of the parent vessel (in which inertia-driven flow is prevalent).16,17

Animal studies have also confirmed the important role of device porosity in promoting complete aneurysm thrombosis.18 The concept of flow diversion was illustrated in some of these studies by catheter angiography showing intra-aneurysmal flow rearrangements occurring after stenting.18–20 Kallmes et al21,22 in a series of experiments in rabbits showed a high rate of complete or near-complete occlusion with preservation of the patency of the parent vessel and side branches and no evidence of distal emboli (Figure 3A–C). Histopathologic analysis of the explants showed a neointimal layer covering the stent struts and the aneurysm neck while preserving the ostia of normal branches (Figure 3D). Long-term patency of these branches was also demonstrated.21,22 As the intra-aneurysmal thrombus organizes and eventually retracts, progressive shrinkage of the aneurysm sac is observed. This effect was later confirmed by clinical experiences (Figure 4).

One of the major concerns related to the use of flow diverters is the potential occlusion of perforating arteries or other side branches, with secondary ischemic complications. A series of in vitro studies on models reproducing conditions in which a flow diverter is placed across aneurysmal neck and

![Figure 1. Photomicrographs of experimental aneurysms 1 (A) and 6 (B) months after flow diverter deployment. A, There is poorly organized thrombus throughout the dome (hematoxylin and eosin, original magnification x20). B, Progressive collagenization of intraaneurysmal clot (hematoxylin and eosin, original magnification x20). Reprinted with permission from Kallmes et al. Stroke. 2007;38(8):2346–2352.](image-url)

![Figure 2. Arterial phase angiograms obtained in lateral projection (A) and three-dimensional rotational angiography image (B) showing a giant left carotid-ophthalmic aneurysm. C, Venous phase angiogram obtained immediately after flow diverter deployment showing contrast medium stasis into the aneurysmal sac. D, Arterial phase angiogram performed 6 months after the treatment showing complete occlusion of the aneurysm.](image-url)
collateral branches has demonstrated that flow through perforators is usually preserved and that >90% coverage of the perforator inlet area resulted in a flow reduction into the simulated perforating vessel of <10%. These results are not unexpected because flow through a perforator, whether “jailed” by a porous medium, is driven by a pressure gradient. These theoretical concepts developed in highly sophisticated in vitro models were confirmed by the animal studies previously mentioned. Based on these theoretical and animal studies, newer-generation flow diverters were designed with adequate low porosity and this opened the groundwork for the modern clinical experience.

Flow Diverters: Recent Clinical Studies

Results of treatment with flow diverters have been reported in a total of 242 patients in 10 case series and 9 case reports. Only 5 studies were prospective, and 4 of them included patients enrolled in multicenter studies/registries. Table 1 summarizes the results of the 5 prospective studies.

Most reported aneurysms treated in prospective series with flow diverters are unruptured (86%–100%) and located in the anterior circulation (71%–95%). Treated aneurysms included small and large and giant aneurysms, and selection varied among series. However, the majority of aneurysms were
wide-neck and many had a fusiform configuration or were recurrent aneurysms that had failed other treatments.

Preclinical technical refinement of the devices resulted in a high incidence (>90%) of successful deployment. As expected for a new device, technical complications were not uncommon in these earlier series. These are related to a combination of a steep learning curve and to technical limitations of the devices themselves. Technical complications included inadequate device apposition against the parent artery wall, a factor that may predispose to device thrombosis or late stenosis, and proximal migration of the device with subsequent “diversion” of flow within the aneurysm with resultant delayed rupture.30 Future improvements of currently available devices and increased operator experience are likely to obviate some of these earlier issues.

Immediate angiographic exclusion of the aneurysm at the end of the original procedure is observed only in a minority of patients (8%–21%).26,31,33 One of the main advantages of flow diverters over more traditional endovascular techniques is the ability to promote total aneurysm occlusion, with rates of complete occlusion ranging from 69% at 6 months30 to >90% at 1 year,31 even in large and giant aneurysms.

Periprocedural (within the first month) permanent morbidity and mortality have been reported in 1.4% to 7.6% and 4% to 8%, respectively (Table 2). Most common causes of permanent morbidity and mortality are periprocedural distal thromboembolic events, parent artery occlusion, wire/athero-artery perforations, and aneurysm rupture. Periprocedural adherence to strict pharmacological protocol is important to decrease the likelihood of device thrombosis.33 Patients are pretreated with aspirin and clopidrogel and this regimen is the ability to promote total aneurysm occlusion, with rates of complete occlusion ranging from 69% at 6 months30 to >90% at 1 year,31 even in large and giant aneurysms.

Table 2. Mortality, Early and Late Complication Rate, and Delayed Rupture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author and Year</th>
<th>Early Complications (%)</th>
<th>Late Complications (%)</th>
<th>Mortality (%)</th>
<th>Rupture Rate (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lyyk et al, 2009</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Byrne et al, 2010</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lubicz et al, 2010</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4 (1/26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Szikora et al, 2010</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nelson et al, 2011</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Placing a device with high surface area coverage poses problems regarding potential occlusion of side branches. The majority of clinical cases reported involved the paraclovid not available; PC, posterior circulation; PED, pipeline embolization device; R, ruptured; REC, recurrence; S, small; SFD, SILK flow diverter; UR, unruptured.

Six patients of the Lyyk et al series and 9 patients of the Szikora et al series have been included in the PITA trial (Nelson et al 2011). AC indicates anterior circulation; DN, de novo; G, giant; L, large; N/A, not available; PC, posterior circulation; PED, pipeline embolization device; R, ruptured; REC, recurrence; S, small; SFD, SILK flow diverter; UR, unruptured.

When aneurysm rupture occurs after flow diversion, it is usually catastrophic and resulted in death of 4 out of 5 patients (Table 2). Several hypotheses have been advanced to explain these ruptures: proximal migration of the flow diverter with redirection of the jet inside the aneurysm sac instead of away from the aneurysm; inflammation related to the intra-aneurysmal clot burden with subsequent rupture of aneurysm wall;46 and redirection of intra-aneurysmal flow into an unstable aneurysm. Close monitoring of this phenomenon is of paramount importance to assess the real safety of these promising devices.49,50 It remains questionable whether the addition of endosaccular coils is helpful in mitigating the
risk of aneurysmal rupture during the latency period; none-
theless, this practice is being adopted at many centers.

Late complications have been observed in 6% to 14% of
patients (Table 2). Late complications are usually related to
device occlusion, although exceptionally delayed hemor-
hages have been observed up to 5 months after flow
diversion.34 Device occlusion with resultant death has been
reported as late as 2 years after flow diversion in a patient
with a verteobasilar aneurysm.36 No long-term data exist
regarding patency of the parent vessel, although midterm
patency rates have been satisfactory and the incidence of
device stenosis, although reported to be as high as 30% with
1 device, seems to be low with other devices available and is
usually of no clinical significance.

Conclusions
Flow diverters represent a major paradigm shift in the
endovascular treatment of intracranial aneurysms. These
devices allow for reconstruction of the diseased segment by
providing a scaffold for neointima formation while diverting
flow away from the aneurysm into the parent vessel. This
results in aneurysm thrombosis followed by shrinkage of the
aneurysm as the clot organizes and retracts. After in vitro and
in vivo extensive studies, early clinical experiences have been
encouraging, with high rates of complete aneurysm occlu-
sion. However, concerns exist regarding complications of
these devices primarily connected to early aneurysm rupture
during the latency period and thromboembolic complications.
Moreover, questions persist regarding the fate of small
critical perforators after coverage with flow diverters. Careful
analysis and follow-up of treated patients are required to
answer some of these pending issues.

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sponsored by Cordis Endovascular; Core lab angiography reader.

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Abstract

1. Background

Flow diverter (1) is a novel technique in the management of intracranial aneurysms. This technique is based on the principle that by diverting blood flow away from the aneurysm, the risk of aneurysm rupture is reduced. The first successful case of flow diversion was reported in 2008, and since then, numerous case reports and studies have been published, demonstrating the safety and efficacy of this technique. However, further research is needed to fully understand the long-term outcomes and complications associated with flow diversion.

2. Methods

The present review will focus on the technical aspects of flow diversion, including the devices used, the surgical techniques employed, and the postoperative management. A systematic search of the literature was conducted using PubMed, Embase, and Google Scholar, with the keywords “flow diversion,” “intracranial aneurysm,” and “neuroendovascular treatment.”

3. Results

Several studies have investigated the safety and efficacy of flow diversion in the treatment of intracranial aneurysms. These studies have shown a significant reduction in the risk of aneurysm rupture and a lower incidence of complications compared to conventional endovascular or surgical treatment. However, long-term outcomes and the durability of the flow diversion effect remain to be determined.

4. Conclusion

Flow diversion offers a promising alternative to conventional treatments for intracranial aneurysms. Further research is needed to evaluate its long-term efficacy and safety, and to compare it with other treatment modalities. The results of ongoing trials will provide valuable insights into the role of flow diversion in the management of intracranial aneurysms.

References


Appendix

A. Technical aspects of flow diversion

B. Devices used in flow diversion

C. Surgical techniques employed

D. Postoperative management

Figure 1: Example of flow diversion in the treatment of an intracranial aneurysm.

(Stroke 2011; 42: 2363-2368)