

EDITORIAL

What Is New in Critical Congenital Heart Defects?

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Congenital heart defects (CHD) are the most common birth defects and result in significant morbidity worldwide. Critical CHD are neonatal cardiovascular emergencies that require medical and surgical treatment early after birth.

The area of Pediatric Cardiology has experienced a huge progress lately, due to advances in diagnostic and therapeutic approaches. However, echocardiography remains the gold standard in the diagnosis and follow-up of patients with critical CHD.

FETAL ECHOCARDIOGRAPHY

Fetal echocardiography has been identified lately as a powerful technique for the diagnosis of CHD. Liu H *et al.* have demonstrated in a meta-analysis that the sensitivity of this technique to identify CHD increases to 77.1% for extensive fetal echocardiographic examination, and the specificity of the method is quite favorable (99.9%).¹

Prenatal diagnosis of CHD has a huge impact on postnatal management and outcome. Several echocardiographic parameters and indexes have been identified to predict the certain postnatal outcome and the proper management, especially in critical CHD such as aortic coarctation, pulmonary atresia with intact ventricular septum, transposition of the great arteries, hypoplastic left heart syndrome, a.s.o.²⁻⁵

Also, the development in ultrasonography technology and fetal interventional techniques allows intrauterine treatment of several CHDs. Complex techniques, such as fetal balloon valvuloplasty for severe aortic stenosis, or severe pulmonary stenosis with intact ventricular sep-

tum, have been described. Also, atrial septoplasty or stent placement were attempted for a restrictive atrial septum in fetuses with hypoplastic left heart syndrome.⁶

POSTNATAL ECHOCARDIOGRAPHY

The role of echocardiography in the management of different critical CHD is greatly emphasized. Some authors have underlined the role of tricuspid valve z score as a predictor of outcome in neonates with pulmonary atresia with intact ventricular septal defect.^{7,8}

Others have described some compound indexes, such as the carotid-subclavian index, an isthmus/ductus ratio with diagnostic value in neonatal aortic coarctation.⁹⁻¹¹

In the current issue of JCE, a study by Muntean *et al.*¹² addresses an important topic related to the role of echocardiography in neonatal cardiovascular emergencies, namely in simple transposition of the great arteries. Inadequate intercirculatory mixing is a fatal condition in such patients, the restrictive interatrial communication being the most important cause of this condition. Balloon atrial septostomy (BSA) is mandatory in such patients in order to create a nonrestrictive atrial septal defect (ASD).

So far, only a few study have assessed the echocardiographic features of inadequate intercirculatory mixing by measuring the ASD size or peak/mean gradient of flow through the interatrial communication, but for now there is no consensus in the literature.¹³⁻¹⁶

Thus, Muntean's study is valuable, as it aims to identify some compound parameters that can predict inadequate mixing in neonates with simple transposition of the great

arteries. Interestingly, the results of the paper indicate three new compound echocardiographic parameters: the LA/RA ratio, the ASD diameter/(LA:RA ratio), and the ASD peak gradient/ASD diameter. According to the study, ASD diameter/(LA:RA ratio) with a cut-off value of 2.58 seems to be the best predictor of inadequate mixing and for BSA requirement in simple TGA patients.

SPECKLE-TRACKING ECHOCARDIOGRAPHY

Speckle-tracking echocardiography is a new echocardiographic method that allows the study of myocardial deformation. In the last few years, the utility of speckle-tracking echocardiography has been proved in childhood in left ventricular assessment in chemotherapy toxicity, muscular dystrophy, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, end-stage renal disease, obesity, right ventricular assessment in pulmonary arterial hypertension, cardiac dyssynchrony etc.¹⁷⁻²¹ So far, in pediatric heart disease, strain imaging is considered a research tool, but it will soon play an important role in clinical practice, just like in adults.

3D ECHOCARDIOGRAPHY

3D echocardiography has become also important in the management of CHD. Recent guidelines recommend using 3D echocardiography to guide catheter-based interventions in children, such as ASD closure or VSD closure, or to measure ventricular volumes and the ejection fraction.²² However, the actual implementation into clinical practice, according to Simpson *et al.*, is questioned by the paucity of normal data in childhood.

NEW TRENDS IN GENETICS

The genetic diagnosis of the CHD has also experienced a huge progress in the last years. However, the etiology of the majority of cardiovascular defects remains unknown, genetic, epigenetic, or environmental factors being recognized as playing an important role. Regarding genetic factors, new technologies are applied lately such as single nucleotide polymorphism (SNPs), copy number variants, or next-generation sequencing.²³⁻²⁸

In conclusion, Pediatric Cardiology is a continuously evolving field of Cardiology. The most difficult part in pediatric echocardiographic evaluation is the lack of the normal data, as measurements have to be expressed relative to body size. Future studies are necessary in order to determine all normal data in pediatric patients.

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