Markedly elevated procalcitonin in early postoperative period in pediatric open heart surgery: a prospective cohort study

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Abstract

Background: We encountered markedly elevated procalcitonin (PCT) among pediatric patients during the early postoperative period of open heart surgery. The purpose of this study is to investigate what factors are associated with the PCT elevation.

Methods: Fifty-two pediatric patients undergoing cardiac surgery with cardiopulmonary bypass (CPB) were enrolled. Plasma PCT, aspartate aminotransferase/alanine aminotransferase (AST/ALT), creatinine, lactate, and C-reactive protein (CRP) were measured on admission to ICU and during the postoperative period. The patients were categorized into high (group H) and low (group L) groups according to their peak PCT levels. Aorta cross-clamp (ACC), CPB time, ICU stay, mechanical ventilation period, peak AST/ALT, creatinine, lactate, and CRP levels were compared.

Results: ACC and CPB times, ICU stay period, and mechanical ventilation period were significantly longer in group H compared with group L (118.7 ± 51.6 vs. 49.4 ± 43.5 min, 244.5 ± 65.7 vs. 122.9 ± 63.0 min, 7.9 ± 4.6 vs. 4.0 ± 4.5 days, and 6.3 ± 4.1 vs. 2.9 ± 4.2 days, respectively; p < 0.01). Peak AST and creatinine were significantly higher in group H compared with group L (999.0 ± 1,990.3 vs. 88.3 ± 43.0 U/l and 0.84 ± 0.77 vs. 0.41 ± 0.17 mg/dl, respectively; p < 0.05).

Conclusions: ACC and CPB time-related perioperative stress is associated with elevated PCT; an association between ICU stay and mechanical ventilation period, liver enzymes, and creatinine levels was observed. PCT may be a good predictor of postoperative severity and organ dysfunction.

Keywords: Procalcitonin, Cardiac surgery, Pediatric

Background

Procalcitonin (PCT) is a polypeptide composed of 116 amino acids. It is the precursor of calcitonin, which is involved in the metabolism of calcium. Under normal metabolic conditions, PCT is secreted by thyroid C cells. Although PCT has recently been advocated as a specific biomarker of severe infection, PCT in this context is supposed to have an extrathyroid origin and a different amino acid structure [1,2]. Furthermore, the production of PCT is said to be associated with inflammatory cytokines such as tumor necrosis factor (TNF)-α [3]; it is also considered to be increased in not only infection but also systemic inflammatory response syndrome (SIRS).

We encountered a few cases of markedly elevated PCT levels among pediatric patients during the early postoperative period after aseptic cardiac surgery. We found several reports investigating changes in PCT levels during postoperative period in adult cases [4-6], but few reports in pediatric cases.

Therefore, in this study, we investigated what factors could be associated with marked elevation in PCT in the early postoperative period in pediatric cases.

Methods

This study was approved by the ethical committee of Nagoya City University Hospital, and an agreement for...
participation in this study was obtained from each patient's family. Fifty-five pediatric patients, who were admitted to the ICU after open heart surgery with cardiopulmonary bypass (CPB), were enrolled. Three patients were excluded because of death during the early postoperative period. None of the patients had any clinical sign of infection on routine preoperative check. General anesthesia was maintained with large-dose fentanyl/midazolam in an oxygen-air mixture supplemented with sevoflurane and chlorpromazine. The method of CPB was almost identical in all patients. Methylprednisolone (50 mg/kg) was administered at the beginning of CPB.

Each patient's PCT level was measured on admission to the ICU and on postoperative days (PODs) 1, 2, 4, and 6. If the patient was discharged from the ICU before POD 6, the subsequent measurements of PCT were discontinued. PCT was measured by immunoluminometric assay (LUMI test PCT, WAKO, Osaka, Japan). Moreover, serum aspartate aminotransferase (AST), alanine aminotransferase (ALT), creatinine (CRE), C-reactive protein (CRP), and lactate (Lac) levels were also measured daily during the ICU stay.

Fifty-two patients were divided into two groups based on their peak PCT levels during the study period: PCT levels ≥5 ng/ml were categorized as group H and PCT levels <5 ng/ml were categorized as group L. We compared the following factors between the two groups: aorta cross-clamp (ACC) time, CPB time, ICU stay, mechanical ventilation period, and peak AST/ALT/CRE/Lac levels. Furthermore, we analyzed changes in PCT and CRP levels during the study. SPSS software ver. 11.0.1 J (IBM SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA) was used for statistical analysis. For comparison of the patient backgrounds, Student’s t test or a chi-square test was used. Measured parameters were compared with an unpaired t test, and changes in PCT and CRP levels over time were compared by two-way repeated measure ANOVA. Significance level was set at p < 0.05.

**Results**

The preoperative characteristics of both groups are shown in Table 1. Twenty-three patients were classified as group H and 29 as group L. Their sex, age, and weight were not significantly different. The peak PCT level, shown as mean ± SD, in group H was 35.9 ± 45.8 ng/ml, while that in group L was 1.1 ± 1.4 ng/ml. Table 2 shows the surgical procedures performed in both groups. More complicated operations, such as the Fallot radical operation and the TCPC (total cavopulmonary bypass), were performed among group H patients, whereas simpler operations, such as closure of atrial and ventricular septal defects, were performed among group L patients. The ACC time, CPB time, ICU stay, and mechanical ventilation period were significantly longer among group H compared with group L patients. Although peak AST and CRE levels in group H were significantly higher than those in group L, peak ALT and Lac levels were not significantly different between the two groups (Table 3). Figure 1 shows the changes over time in the average PCT and CRP levels for both groups until POD 6. The average PCT levels among group H patients formed a very high peak on POD 1 and in subsequent PODs returned to the levels of POD 0. Furthermore, they were significantly higher compared with those in group L on all PODs. The CRP level was not significantly different among the two groups on any POD.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the factors associated with the marked elevation of PCT observed during the early postoperative period after pediatric cardiac surgery with CPB was performed in aseptic condition. Longer ACC and CPB times and more complicated operations were observed among the patients with higher peak PCT levels. Franke et al. reported that PCT levels in patients after on-pump coronary artery bypass grafting were higher than those after off-pump coronary artery bypass surgery [7]. Hammer et al. compared PCT levels between groups of pediatric patients with longer and shorter ACC time after cardiac surgery with CPB and concluded that SIRS induced by cardiac surgery with CPB influenced PCT levels on the first day after surgery [8]. Similarly, Beghetti et al. reported that PCT levels were influenced by duration of CPB and ACC time [9]. In this study, we obtained comparable results, which

| Table 2 Operative procedure |
|-----------------------------|

| Procedure                      | Group H | Group L |
|-------------------------------|---------|---------|
| Fallot radical operation      | 6       | 0       |
| TCPC                          | 4       | 0       |
| Bicirectional Glenn operation | 3       | 2       |
| DORV radical operation        | 3       | 0       |
| VSD closure                   | 2       | 6       |
| ASD closure                   | 1       | 13      |
| Norwood operation             | 1       | 1       |
| Others                        | 3       | 7       |
| Total                         | 23      | 29      |

NS not significant.
Table 3 The comparison of each parameter between both groups

| Parameter                  | Group H    | Group L     | p value |
|----------------------------|------------|-------------|---------|
| ACC time (min)             | 118.7 ± 51.6 | 49.4 ± 43.5 | <0.001  |
| CPB time (min)             | 244.5 ± 65.7 | 122.9 ± 63.0 | <0.001  |
| ICU stay (days)            | 7.9 ± 4.6  | 4.0 ± 4.5   | 0.003   |
| Mechanical ventilation (days) | 6.3 ± 4.1  | 2.9 ± 4.2   | 0.005   |
| AST (U/l)                  | 999.0 ± 1,990.3 | 88.3 ± 430.0 | 0.039   |
| ALT (U/l)                  | 262.4 ± 662.8 | 15.3 ± 3.3  | 0.070   |
| Creatinine (mg/dl)         | 0.84 ± 0.77 | 0.41 ± 0.17 | 0.014   |
| Lactate (mg/dl)            | 34.8 ± 20.6 | 29.1 ± 24.4 | 0.380   |

Figure 1 The changes over time in PCT and CRP until POD6. The mean values of PCT in group H became peak in the POD 1. There were not any significant differences between the two group’s CRP levels in any days.
infection [10]. Although in our study there were no cases where PCT was elevated again by POD 6, if we had observed re-elevation of PCT in measurements taken after POD 6, it would have been necessary to take infection into consideration.

In our study, we divided the patients into two groups based on peak PCT levels higher and lower than 5 ng/ml. In cases of severe infection or sepsis, 2 ng/ml is used as a cutoff value. Macrina et al. claimed that a PCT concentration greater than 0.5 ng/ml was highly suggestive of a postoperative complication following CPB in adults [4]. However, because our pediatric cases had higher PCT levels (the highest value being 165 ng/ml), we thought it is suitable to use a cutoff value higher than that for severe infection and sepsis or for adult cases. Celebi et al. mentioned that the peak PCT of 5 had high sensitivity (100%) and specificity (95%) as the organ failure predictive cutoff values in pediatric open heart surgery [10].

Conclusions
Prolonged ACC and CPB times, prolonged mechanical ventilation period and ICU stay, and higher serum AST and CRE levels were observed among patients with peak PCT levels >5 ng/ml. PCT levels during the early postoperative period can be an index of intraoperative stress and postoperative severity and a good predictor of organ dysfunction among pediatric patients after cardiac surgery with CPB.

Competing interests
The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors’ contributions
EM planned the study, performed the statistical analysis, and drafted the manuscript. SI helped to draft the manuscript. TS, YF, HS, and KS participated in the data collection. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Received: 23 March 2014 Accepted: 28 May 2014 Published: 20 June 2014

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doi:10.1186/2052-0492-3-8
Cite this article as: Minami et al.: Markedly elevated procalcitonin in early postoperative period in pediatric open heart surgery: a prospective cohort study. Journal of Intensive Care 2014 2:38.