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Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on STEMI undergoing primary PCI treatment in Beijing, China

Xuhe Gong, Li Zhou, Tianhui Dong, Xiaosong Ding, Huiqiang Zhao, Hui Chen, Hongwei Li

Department of Cardiology, Cardiovascular Center, Beijing Friendship Hospital, Capital Medical University, Beijing 100050, PR China
Department of Internal Medicine, Medical Health Center, Beijing Friendship Hospital, Capital Medical University, Beijing 100050, PR China
Department of Cardiology, Cardiovascular Center, Beijing Friendship Hospital, Capital Medical University, Beijing 100050, PR China
Beijing Key Laboratory of Metabolic Disorder Related Cardiovascular Disease, Beijing 100069, PR China

Objective: Strict control measures under the COVID epidemic have brought an inevitable impact on ST-segment elevation myocardial infarction (STEMI)’s emergency treatment. We investigated the impact of the COVID on the treatment of patients with STEMI undergoing primary PCI.

Methods: In this single center cohort study, we selected a time frame of 6 month after declaration of COVID-19 infection (Jan 24-July 24, 2020); a group of STEMI patients in the same period of 2019 was used as control. Finally, a total of 246 STEMI patients, who were underwent primary PCI, were enrolled into the study (136 non COVID-19 outbreak periods and 110 COVID-19 outbreak periods). The impact of COVID on the time of symptom onset to the first medical contact (symptom-to-FMC) and door to balloon (D-to-B) was investigated. Moreover, the primary outcome was in-hospital major adverse cardiac events (MACE), defined as a composite of cardiac death, heart failure and malignant arrhythmia.

Results: Compared with the same period in 2019, there was a 19% decrease in the total number of STEMI patients undergoing primary PCI at the peak of the pandemic in 2020. The delay in symptom-to-FMC was significantly longer in COVID Outbreak period (180 [68.75, 342] min vs 120 [60,240] min, P = 0.003), and the D-to-B times increased significantly (148 [115–190] vs 84 [70–120] min, P < 0.001). However, among patients with STEMI, MACE was similar in both time periods (18.3% vs 25.7%, p = 0.168). On multivariable analysis, COVID was not independently associated with MACE; the history of diabetes, left main disease and age>65 years were the strongest predictors of MACE in the overall population.

Conclusions: The COVID pandemic was not independently associated with MACE; suggesting that active primary PCI treatment preserved high-quality standards even when challenged by a severe epidemic.

Clinical trial registration: URL: https://ClinicalTrials.gov Unique identifier: NCT04427735.

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center in China in regard to the influence of COVID-19 pandemic on patients with STEMI.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and patients

We performed a retrospective analysis of a cohort of STEMI patients undergoing primary PCI from January 24 to July 24, 2020 (COVID-19 outbreak period) at Beijing Friendship Hospital. We designated January 24, 2020 as the start of the COVID-19 era since Beijing raised the public health incident response to the highest level on that date [7]. A group of STEMI patients from a similar time period of last year (January 24–July 24, 2019; Non outbreak period) was used as control. STEMI patients who were already in hospital during symptom onset were excluded. And only STEMI patients who underwent primary PCI were included in this study. The study protocol was approved by the ethics committee of our hospital. Patient flow of the study is shown in Fig. 1.

2.2. Study outcomes

The outcome was door-to-balloon (D-to-B) time, symptom onset to first medical contact (Symptom-to-FMC) time. Characteristics of the STEMI cases, including demographic data (age, sex, BMI), history of past illness (hypertension, diabetes, hyperlipemia, old myocardial infarction and other diseases), conditions of smoking and drinking, family histories of coronary heart disease were recorded.

The peak values of cardiac troponin (cTnI and cTnT), creatine kinase-myocardial band (CK-MB) were used as indicators of myocardial injury. Moreover, cTnI and cTnT level on admission was also recorded. Serum peak concentration of N terminal pro brain natriuretic peptide (NT-proBNP) was used to reflect heart function. These cardiac markers were measured on admission and every 24 h until the peaks occurred. The left ventricular ejection fraction (LVEF) was determined using 2-dimensional echocardiography within 3 days after primary PCI.

The major adverse cardiac events (MACE) in hospital were defined as cardiac death, malignant arrhythmia and heart failure (HF). Malignant arrhythmia was defined as a tachyarrhythmia requiring electrical cardioversion therapy or a bradyarrhythmia requiring pacemaker therapy. Moreover, HF was determined by symptom, physical sign and the result of echocardiography (EF<50%).

2.3. Statistical analysis

Data analysis was performed with SPSS, version 25.0 (IBM Corporation, Armonk, NY) and Metaninf function in Stata 12.0. Categorical variables were summarized as numbers and percentages and compared using Pearson χ2 test. Continuous variables were expressed as a mean ± SD (standard deviation) or median with IQR (interquartile range) and compared using Student t-test, Mann-Whitney test or Wilcoxon tests as appropriate. Logistic regression analysis was used to analyze the factors that affect MACE. P value <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

3. Results

3.1. Population characteristics

A total of 246 patients were included during the described time frames (136 Non COVID-19 outbreak periods and 110 COVID-19 Outbreak periods). No patient showed positive results by CT or throat swab test. There was a 19% decrease in the total number of STEMI patients undergoing primary PCI in the outbreak period. Patients presenting with STEMI were similar in terms of demographics (age, gender, BMI) and comorbidities (Hypertension, Hyperlipidemia, Previous history of Coronary Heart Disease and PCI) during both time periods. However, the proportion of patients with diabetes was higher, and the proportion of old myocardial infarctions was reduced in 2020. Moreover, the location of myocardial infarction and TIMI risk score in the two groups are comparable. During the COVID epidemic, the average hospital stay decreased [8 [6,10] vs 9 [8,11], p<0.001]. In terms of drug use, the proportion of patients treated with dual antiplatelet therapy (DAPT), statins and β-blockers were similar among the two groups. However, compared with the non-COVID period, the proportion of ACEI/ARB application during the COVID period has decreased (56.4% vs 69.9, p = 0.029). The baseline clinical characteristics are shown in Table 1.

3.2. Myocardial enzymes and cardiac function during the COVID-19 outbreak

The peak values of cTnI, cTnT and CK-MB were used as indicators of myocardial injury, we found no difference between the two groups. However, the index of cTnI (0.11 ng/ml vs 0.08 ng/ml) and cTnT (0.05 ng/ml vs 0.02 ng/ml) in admission has a rising trend, although there is no statistical difference.

From the perspective of cardiac function assessed by echocardiography, the LVEF and end-diastolic dimension (EDD) between the two groups were also similar, as shown in Table 1. Lastly, there was no difference in the peak concentration of NT-proBNP levels.

3.3. Symptom-to-FMC and D-to-B times

The delay in symptom-to-FMC was significantly longer in COVID outbreak period (180[68.75, 342] vs 120[60,240] min, P = 0.003) compared to no outbreak period group. The proportion of patient presenting 12 h after onset of symptom was higher (10% vs 3.7%) in 2020 (Fig. 2 A). Moreover, in the COVID outbreak period, patients had significantly
Coronary angiographic and lesion characteristics

Left main disease (LM disease) and infarction related artery were seen of cardiac death, heart failure, and malignant arrhythmia (Table 3).

Clinical outcomes

The hospital cardiac death occurred in 4 patients (1.6%) in the overall population. No significant differences were observed in the incidence of cardiac death, heart failure, and malignant arrhythmia (Table 3).

Table 1
Baseline clinical characteristics of STEMI patients underwent PCI according to the study period.

| Variable                        | Non-outbreak period | Outbreak period | P    |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|------|
| Age years, years                | 61 ± 13             | 58 ± 13         | 0.087|
| Male, n (%)                     | 105 (77.2)          | 79 (71.8)       | 0.333|
| BMI, kg/m²                      | 25.28 ± 3.54        | 25.78 ± 3.62    | 0.283|
| Hypertension, n (%)             | 78 (57.4)           | 67 (60.9)       | 0.573|
| Diabetes, n (%)                 | 29 (21.3)           | 39 (35.5)       | 0.014|
| Hyperlipidemia, n (%)           | 43 (31.6)           | 44 (40)         | 0.172|
| Smoking, n (%)                  | 87 (64)             | 71 (64.5)       | 0.925|
| Drinking, n (%)                 | 19 (14)             | 16 (14.5)       | 0.898|
| Previous history of CAD, n (%)  | 22 (16.2)           | 13 (11.8)       | 0.331|
| Previous history of OMI, n (%)  | 13 (9.6)            | 3 (2.7)         | 0.031|
| Previous history of PCL, n (%)  | 16 (11.8)           | 8 (7.3)         | 0.238|
| Previous history of Stroke, n (%)| 15 (11)            | 15 (13.6)       | 0.534|
| Family history of CAD, n (%)    | 41 (30.1)           | 36 (32.7)       | 0.664|
| T/C                             | 36.3 ± 0.3          | 36.3 ± 0.3      | 0.397|
| SBP, mmHg                       | 123 ± 26            | 121 ± 20        | 0.472|
| DBP, mmHg                       | 76 ± 19             | 74 ± 13         | 0.349|
| HR, bpm                         | 76 ± 15             | 75 ± 14         | 0.72 |
| GFR<60 ml/min, n (%)            | 13 (9.6)            | 10 (9.1)        | 0.9  |
| Killip2, n (%)                  | 31 (22.8)           | 19 (17.3)       | 0.285|
| LVEDD, cm                       | 5.1 ± 0.4           | 5.1 ± 0.4       | 0.742|
| LVEF                            | 0.57 ± 0.08         | 0.58 ± 0.08     | 0.594|
| CK-MB, max, ng/ml               | 93.2 (41,98,173.05) | 91.4 (43,03,151,16) | 0.982|
| cTnI, max, ng/ml                | 50 (29,32,50)       | 50 (21,73,50)   | 0.68 |
| cTnI, max, ng/ml                | 3.95 (2,77,5)       | 4.8 (1,98,83)   | 0.499|
| NT-pro BNP, max, pg/ml          | 1660                | 1447            | 0.647|
| cTnI on admission, ng/ml        | 0.08 (0.01,06)      | 0.11 (0.02,06)  | 0.72 |
| cTnI on admission, ng/ml        | 0.02 (0.01,015)     | 0.05 (0.01,21)  | 0.098|
| Location of MI, n (%)           | 70 (51.5)           | 47 (2.7)        | 0.343|
| Anterior                        | 59 (43.4)           | 58 (2.7)        | 0.57 |
| Inferior                        | 7 (5.1)             | 5 (4.5)         | 0.99 |
| Hospital days                   | 9 (8.11)            | 8 (6.10)        | <0.001|
| TIMI risk score                 | 3.88 ± 2.34         | 3.77 ± 2        | 0.715|
| Medical therapy                 |                      |                 |      |
| DAPT, n(%)                      | 136 (100)           | 110 (100)       | 1    |
| Beta-blocker, n (%)             | 99 (72.8)           | 91 (82.7)       | 0.065|
| ACEI/ARB, n (%)                 | 95 (69.9)           | 62 (56.4)       | 0.029|
| Statin, n (%)                   | 128 (94.1)          | 103 (93.6)      | 0.274|

Moreover, the 30 days mortality rate was 1.5% (non COVID-19 outbreak periods) and 3.6% (COVID-19 outbreak periods) respectively, and there was also no statistical difference (p = 0.274). The correlates of MACE in multivariable analysis are presented in Fig. 3; there were no significant associations between the COVID period and MACE; while, the history of diabetes; left main disease and age > 65 years were the strongest predictors of MACE in the overall population.

4. Discussion

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic have greatly affected healthcare services around the world. The current study highlights the impact of COVID-19 outbreak on STEMI patient undergoing primary PCI. We found that the primary PCI volume seems to be reduced by 19% during the pandemic; moreover, the symptom-to-FMC and D-to-B times were delayed. However, there were no significant associations between the COVID period and MACE. Active and effective primary PCI may improve the prognosis of STEMI patients during the special epidemic period.

In terms of comorbidities, our data showed that the proportion of STEMI patients with previous myocardial infarction decreased in COVID period; this may be related to the fact that such patients pay more attention to heart health, coupled with the decrease in activity during the epidemic, which all caused a reduction in the predisposing factors of myocardial infarction. However, a higher proportion of patients in the COVID outbreak period presented with diabetes compared with the non-outbreak period. During the epidemic, medical treatment was not standardized or even interrupted due to inconvenient medical treatment. This may increase the risk of acute myocardial infarction in diabetic patients.

STEMI is the most acute manifestation of coronary artery disease and is associated with great morbidity and mortality, primary PCI is the typical recommended therapy. Immediate reperfusion of coronary arteries related to infarction can better improve patient prognosis [8,9]. However, the public health emergencies such as COVID will inevitably have an impact on the treatment of STEMI patients. Many cardiac catheterization laboratories in China have scaled down the number of cases; we carried out PCIs continuously to treat high-risk ACS patients in need of interventions under modified approaches aiming at minimizing the nosocomial infection risk. Patients treated in our hospital will undergo the “3+ 1” screening model, include complete blood count, chest CT, throat swab nucleic acid test and epidemiological investigation, which will inevitably lead to the prolonged D-to-B time. In the current study, the delay in D-to-B during the COVID period is substantial, with an increase in the median from 84 to 148 min compared with non COVID period.

On the other hand, the willingness of patients to present to the emergency department is also the focus of our observation, we found that the symptom-to-FMC time was increased also, the proportion of patient presenting 12 h after onset of symptom increased from 3.7% to 10%; this may be related to factors such as fear of COVID exposure and prohibition of patients to medical service from the society should increase publicity for COVID and cardiovascular disease awareness during the current pandemic. To our knowledge, this is the first report from the China mainland highlighting the problem. This suggests that the society should increase publicity for COVID and cardiovascular emergency. Moreover, due to fear of the epidemic and prohibition of visits of patients in our hospital, the average hospital stay of patients with STEMI also decreased in the COVID period.

Our study also examined the baseline cTnI and cTnT level on admission. Although there is no statistical difference, the index of cTnI and cTnT in admission has a rising trend in the 2020 COVID period, we believe that this difference may become statistically significant as the sample size expands.

In terms of drug use, the use of ACEI/ARB were different between two groups, the proportion of ACEI/ARB application during the COVID period has decreased. This difference was not associated with COVID pandemic.
First of all, the patients in our study are non-COVID patients. Secondly, although some recent experimental studies have found that SARS-CoV-2 uses ACE2 as the receptors for entry. On the other side, some evidences suggest that the ACE2 receptor is not necessary for SARS-CoV-2 entry into the cell and suggested that there is a cofactor that play part, human studies showed that there is no association between ACEI/ARB with SARS-CoV-2 infectivity and mortality. In conclusion, there is still insufficient data to stop the use of ACEI/ARB in COVID patients [12].

The research views on COVID and ACEI/ARB have not affected our decision-making on the application of ACEI/ARB. The use of ACEI/ARB were different in our study, this may be related to the condition of the patients. In clinical practice, for patients with myocardial infarction, we will give priority to antihypertensive drugs that can improve the prognosis, such as ACE/ARB and β-blockers. The blood pressure level and heart rate are factors that affect the use of these drugs. We speculated that the blood pressure of STEMI patients in the COVID group may be low, and ACEI/ARB drugs cannot be added. Moreover, As the research sample size expands, this difference may disappear.

Notably, there was no significant difference in the characteristics of coronary artery lesions by coronary angiography between the two groups. However, in the 2020 COVID period, the use of thrombus aspiration equipment during PCI was decreased significantly; this may be related to the autolysis or organization of thrombosis caused by the delayed symptom-to-FMC time and D to B time.

Although the epidemic has affected patients’ willingness to visit a doctor and medical treatment, we did not find differences in hospital MACE and 30 days mortality between the two groups of patients, the MACE includes malignant arrhythmia, heart failure and cardiac death.

Table 2
Coronary angiographic, lesion characteristics, S-to-FMC and D-to-B time in 2019 and 2020.

| Variable                                | Non outbreak period | Outbreak period | P      |
|-----------------------------------------|---------------------|----------------|--------|
|                                         | Jan 24, 2019,       | Jan 24, 2020,  |        |
|                                         | Through             | Through        |        |
|                                         | July 24, 2019       | July 24, 2020  |        |
|                                         | (n = 136)           | (n = 110)      |        |
| three vessel disease, n (%)             | 94(69.1)            | 71(64.5)       | 0.448  |
| LM disease, n (%)                       | 12(8.8)             | 6(5.5)         | 0.313  |
| Infarction related artery, n (%)        | 71(52.2)            | 49(44.5)       | 0.254  |
| LAD                                     | 22(16.2)            | 15(13.6)       |        |
| LCX                                     | 43(31.6)            | 46(41.8)       |        |
| Thrombus aspiration device, n (%)       | 55(40.4)            | 12(10.9)       | <0.001 |
| Door to Balloon, min (median [IQR])     | 84(70,120)          | 148(115,190)   | <0.001 |
| Symptom-to-FMC, min (median [IQR])      | 120(60,240)         | 180(86,75,342) | 0.003  |

LM: left main coronary artery; LAD: left anterior descending artery; LCX: left circumflex artery; RCA: right coronary artery; FMC, first medical contact; p values for comparisons between the two groups. Significance level was 0.05.

Table 3
Comparison of clinical MACE during hospitalization and 30 days mortality between study groups.

| Variable                              | Non outbreak period | Outbreak period | P      |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------|----------------|--------|
| Jan 24, 2019, Through                 |                     |                |        |
| Jan 24, 2020, Through                |                     |                |        |
| (n = 136)                             | (n = 110)           |                |        |
| MACE, n(%)                            | 35(25.7)            | 20(18.3)       | 0.168  |
| Cardiac death, n(%)                   | 2(1.5)              | 2(1.8)         | 0.83   |
| Malignant arrhythmia, n(%)            | 16(11.8)            | 8(7.3)         | 0.238  |
| Heart failure, n(%)                   | 22(16.2)            | 14(12.8)       | 0.464  |
| 30 days mortality, n(%)               | 2(1.5)              | 4(3.6)         | 0.274  |

MACE: major adverse cardiovascular events; p values for comparisons between the two groups. Significance level was 0.05.

Fig. 2. The distribution of time delays in minutes for the 2019 and 2020 groups. A: The proportion of patient presenting 12 h after onset of symptom was higher in 2020; B: The scatter plot reflects the extended D to B time in 2020.

Fig. 3. Factors associated with MACE in multivariable analysis. Variables associated with MACE are shown along the vertical axis. The strength of effect is shown along the horizontal axis with the vertical line demarcating an odds ratio (OR) of 1 (i.e., no association); estimates to the right (i.e., > 1) are associated with a greater likelihood of MACE, whereas those to the left (i.e., < 1) indicate a reduced likelihood of MACE. Each dot represents the point estimate of the effect of that variable in the model, whereas the line shows the 95% confidence interval (CI).
In this study, there was a large increase in D to B time (148 vs 84 min) in 2020 compared to 2019 and yet no difference in outcomes. This is a surprising result. More importantly, we believed that active and effective primary PCI improved patient prognosis when challenged by a severe epidemic. The strongest predictors of MACE were the history of diabetes, left main disease and age>65 years. Further studies are necessary to determine whether the delayed symptom-to-FMC time and D to B time will lead to differences in long-term prognosis.

4.1. Limitations

Our present study had limitations inherent to its nonrandomized, observational design. First, this is a single center observational experience; the research sample size is relatively small. Second, the follow-up time was still short; patients were only followed up during hospitalization and one month after discharge. The long-term effect of delayed “Symptom-to-FMC and D-to-B” during COVID-19 pandemic is yet to be determined, such as newly diagnosed heart failure cases and even increased mortality. Third, the onset of symptom is a subjective parameter and might not be precisely recorded.

5. Conclusion

During the current COVID-19 outbreak, the primary PCI volume seems to be reduced, the “door to Balloon and Symptom-to-FMC” were delayed, but the prognosis of STEMI patients is not different. When there are symptoms of discomfort, the patient should seek medical attention in time instead of staying at home, especially for patients with STEMI. More importantly, Active primary PCI treatment under effective protection is the key to improving the prognosis of patients.

Author contributors

Conception and drafting the article: HWL and XHG. Data collection, analysis, and interpretation: XHG, LZ, THD and XSD. Revising the article: HC and HQZ. Final approval of the manuscript to be published: all authors.

Ethics approval

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Beijing Friendship Hospital. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Funding

This study was supported by Beijing Municipal Administration of Hospitals’ Youth Programme (QML20200106) and Beijing Key Clinical Subject Program.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

Acknowledgment

The authors are grateful to all physicians and nurses of emergency primary coronary intervention team, the COVID screening team composed of emergency medicine specialists, infectious disease experts, radiologists. We thank Zhao Guoliang for data collection.

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