To the Editor.—We read with great interest the research article by Fox et al.1 on genetic variation within defined regions of the NPPA/NPPB and NPR3 natriuretic peptide system genes as predictors for ventricular dysfunction after coronary artery bypass graft surgery. What concerns us as clinicians is the relation between those biomarkers and postoperative outcome, which can facilitate the preoperative risk evaluation. This article raised a good question: whether B-type natriuretic peptide (BNP) or its gene polymorphism predicts the prognosis in patients undergoing coronary artery bypass graft surgery.

It is well known that a gene’s function is mediated by expression of a specific protein. BNP has been established as a prognostic indicator in adults with congestive heart failure2 and coronary artery disease,3 whereas single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) in the NPPB gene significantly impact BNP levels.4 In the article by Dr. Fox et al., there was mention that genetic variation within NPPA/ NPPB and NPR3 genes was associated with risk of ventricular dysfunction after adjustment for preoperative BNP level and clinical factors. However, the authors did not directly analyze the relation between SNPs of these BNP genes with BNP level, especially postoperative BNP, whose level was not provided. Previous studies have shown that early postoperative BNP levels correlate significantly with the ensuing duration of inotropic support and duration of hospitalization.5 Therefore, we considered that SNPs of BNP genes could affect postoperative BNP rather than preoperative BNP and then predicted the prognosis, because expression of those genetic loci could be up- or down-regulated by mechanical stretch, ischémic injury, hypoxia, or even inflammatory mediators during surgery.6 And the analysis should include both preoperative and postoperative BNP levels in this study.

We think that the predictive pathway should be: SNPs of BNP-BNP level-clinical prognosis. If this hypothesis is established, it is postoperative BNP rather than SNPs of BNP that directly predicts ventricular dysfunction. Further investigations are still required to elucidate how BNP and its SNPs relate to development of postoperative ventricular dysfunction.

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References

(Accepted for publication July 29, 2009.)

In Reply.—We appreciate the interest of Dr. Yu et al. in our April 2009 publication in which we describe significant associations between single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) within the natriuretic peptide NPPA, NPPB, and NPR3 genes and the occurrence of ventricular dysfunction (VnD) after primary coronary artery bypass graft surgery.1 We agree that assessing natriuretic peptide system gene SNPs for association with perioperative plasma B-type natriuretic peptide (BNP) levels may improve understanding of the underlying biology linking these SNPs to postoperative VnD, and we are currently conducting these analyses.

Although we agree with Dr. Yu et al. that the association between natriuretic peptide SNPs and perioperative BNP concentrations should be assessed, the biologic mechanisms for the association between these SNPs and postoperative VnD may be more complex than the pathway that they propose, i.e., that natriuretic peptide system gene variants predict perioperative plasma BNP levels, which in turn predict postoperative VnD. As Dr. Yu et al. rightly point out, increased plasma BNP is an established biomarker for heart failure. Indeed, we have previously reported that postoperative plasma BNP is significantly increased in patients who develop in-hospital VnD after coronary artery bypass graft surgery versus those who do not.2 Despite the fact that circulating plasma BNP is known to be increased in heart failure, we are aware of at least four studies of outpatient, noncardiac cohorts that report that one or more of the NPPA/NPPB SNP alleles that we found associated with decreased VnD associate with increased plasma BNP levels (approximately 10 pg/ml increase in plasma BNP for each copy of the minor allele).4,5,6 One hypothesis to explain the seeming conundrum of why plasma BNP may be modestly increased in ambulatory patients who carry NPPA/NPPB SNP alleles that are associated with decreased VnD may be that these SNPs code for qualitative as well as quantitative changes in circulating BNP. Indeed, recent studies have shown that there is functional heterogeneity in circulating forms of plasma BNP, with heart failure patients tending to have higher plasma ratios of biologically inactive precursor pro-BNP compared with subjects without heart failure.7,8 Certain natriuretic peptide SNPs may be associated with increased production of biologically inactive BNP. Furthermore, there is evidence that natriuretic peptides have both autocrine and paracrine influences on ventricular myocardiun.9 Therefore, we can postulate that even though a natriuretic peptide gene SNP may associate with increased BNP levels, the qualitative nature of the BNP produced may mitigate the development of postoperative VnD through its direct effects on the myocardiun.

In summary, we appreciate the comments of Dr. Yu et al. and fully agree that further study of natriuretic peptide system gene variants, circulating natriuretic peptides, and natriuretic peptide tissue effects are needed to tease out mechanisms for our observed associations between NPPA/NPPB and NPR3 gene variants and development of VnD after coronary artery bypass graft surgery.

Anesthesiology 2009; 111:1378–9

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(Submitted for publication July 29, 2009.)

To the Editor.—The recent article by Wilder et al.1 presents a concerning correlation between multiple episodes of anesthesia in childhood and later learning disabilities. In the discussion of possible causes for this correlation, they focus on the known neurotoxicity of various anesthetic agents in vitro and in animal studies. They identify some possible sources of bias in their study but neglect to mention one of the most significant changes in anesthetic practice, which occurred after the children in the study received their anesthesia.

Pulse oximetry was developed in the 1970s but only became commonly used in anesthesia at the end of the 1980s and was made a part of the American Society of Anesthesiologists standards for basic anesthetic monitoring. The introduction of a standard for monitoring and the availability of pulse oximetry coincided with a great reduction in the incidence of undetected hypoxia and resultant injury as demonstrated at Harvard at the time.2 Because the children in this study received their anesthesia in the period 1976 through 1986, the possibility that their increased incidence of learning difficulties might have resulted partly from undetected hypoxia brief or mild enough not to have caused injury that was immediately obvious should not be discounted. A comparison with children who received a more current standard of monitoring after 1990 would be helpful in determining the likely magnitude of this effect.

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References


(Accepted for publication July 31, 2009.)

To the Editor.—Regarding the article by Wilder et al.,1 this research is an important step in the right direction to either prove or disprove the association of learning disabilities with multiple exposures to anesthesia in the early years of life possibly caused by anesthetic agent-induced neuroapoptosis. The authors are to be congratulated for making a stab at this complex issue, and not connecting the dots directly but rightfully pointing out that many factors might contribute to their findings that are unrelated to anesthesia. However, one important factor that seems to have been overlooked is that the majority of these children were likely anesthetized before the routine use of pulse oximetry and capnography (1976–1982) became our standard of care. We do not know what happens to a child who is excessively ventilated for prolonged periods of time, resulting in severe hypocapnia and possibly reduced areas of cerebral perfusion. Nor do we know how many of these children experienced prolonged or repeated short episodes of hypoxemia that were either unrecognized or only recognized late in the event, when the child developed bradycardia that could have resulted in subtle neurologic insults. In the early years when capnography was first being advocated but not yet a standard of care, in a prospective study of 351 children, we found an 11% incidence of hypocapnia (expired carbon dioxide value ≤ 30 mmHg) in intubated children, with a very high incidence in children younger than 1 yr.2 Likewise, in two randomized blinded studies involving 554 children, we found 94

Learning Disability and Repeated Anesthetics: Drugs or Airway Management Issues?

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