Hypoxemia Following Pulmonary Embolism: A Dog Model of Altering Regional Perfusion


We studied the role played by a shift in perfusion to hypoxic lung areas after pulmonary embolism in post embolic hypoxemia. A tracheal divider was used to separate hypoxic (N₂ ventilated) from oxygenated (100 per cent O₂ ventilated) lung in anasthetized dogs. Relative perfusion was assessed from total 133Xenon (133Xe) exhaled from each lung area after intravenous infusions. When one lung area was ventilated with N₂ and the other with O₂ at a normal PₐCO₂ to allow hypoxic pulmonary vasoconstriction (HPV), there was a significant (P < 0.001) shift away from the hypoxic side. Starch or blood clots were then infused to produce pulmonary emboli. Starch emboli were distributed predominantly to the oxygenated lung. After blood clot embolization in normocapnic dogs, pulmonary artery pressure increased 15 torr, perfusion to the hypoxic lung increased from 14 ± 2 to 23 ± 1 per cent, and PₐO₂ fell from 278 to 186 torr. When the degree of HPV was reduced in another group of dogs by hypcapnea, a similar increase in pulmonary artery pressure (14 torr) created by blood clot embolism did not shift perfusion or create hypoxemia. In all dogs the perfusion shift to hypoxic lung was sufficient to account for all the post embolic hypoxemia. In this dog model, post embolic hypoxemia is explained by preferential distribution of emboli to oxygenated lung followed by perfusion shift to hypoxic lung as the effect of HPV is overcome by pulmonary hypertension. (Key words: Complications: embolism. Embolism: pulmonary, Hypoxia. Lung: blood flow; hypoxic pulmonary vasoconstriction; shunting. Ventilation: shunting.)

Hypoxemia is frequently observed after pulmonary embolism. However, there is no general agreement on the physiologic mechanisms involved.

We propose a mechanism that may contribute to the hypoxemia after pulmonary embolism. In the presence of many lung diseases and probably even in normal lungs there are areas that receive less ventilation than others. If alveolar hypoxia is present, the vessels perfusing these areas will be vasoconstricted owing to hypoxic pulmonary vasoconstriction (HPV). The distribution of emboli is proportional to perfusion. Therefore, emboli entering the pulmonary circulation will distribute predominantly to well ventilated and thus better perfused lung areas, occluding their vessels. The resulting redistribution of blood flow exhausts the remaining vascular compliance, the pulmonary arterial pressure (Pₐpa) will rise, attenuate the effect of HPV and force blood through the vessels perfusing hyperventilated lung. This shunted blood will mix with blood perfusing normal lung, creating hypoxemia.

This hypothesis was tested in a dog model by ventilating one area of lung with nitrogen to create regional alveolar hypoxia. The remaining lung area was ventilated with oxygen. We measured perfusion to each lung area and the change in PₐO₂ before and after pulmonary emboli were infused. Since the hypothesis is dependent on the presence of HPV, we repeated the experiment when the degree of HPV was reduced by lowering PₐCO₂ through hyperventilation.

Materials and Methods

The Experimental Model

The experiments were carried out on 17 mongrel dogs weighing 25–30 kg. Anesthesia was induced with pentobarbital, 30 mg/kg, intravenously (iv) and maintained with intermittent infusions of pentobarbital and pancuronium bromide (these agents have been shown not to affect HPV). The dogs were intubated through a tracheostomy with a Carlen’s double lumen endotracheal tube. The endobronchial end was wedged into a first-order bronchus and sealed by inflating the cuff. While the amount of lung ventilated by each lumen of the double-lumen tube was not critical, it was important that the lung separation be maintained throughout the experiment and remain constant. To assure this, the seal was checked for leaks by ventilating the animal through one lumen while the other was attached to a tube submerged under water, Pₐpa was measured by testing gas aspirated from each bronchus during inspiration when nitrogen was in one lung area and oxygen in the other, and the ratio of ventilation to the two lung areas was monitored throughout the experiment. If this ratio changed, as it occasionally did owing to tube movement or cuff leakage, the results were discarded.

The pulmonary artery and a femoral artery were catheterized to monitor pressures continuously. All lines were kept patent by intermittent flushing with physiologic saline; no heparin was used. Arterial

* Research Fellow.
† Associate Professor.
‡ Chief Technician.

Received from the Department of Anaesthesia, University of Toronto, St. Michael’s Hospital, 30 Bond Street, Toronto, Ontario M5B 1W8. Accepted for publication September 3, 1980. Supported by the York-Toronto Lung Association and the Medical Research Council of Canada.

Address reprint requests to Dr. W. H. Noble.
and mixed venous blood samples were obtained for blood gas analysis, and cardiac output was determined by the thermodilution technique. An additional large-bore catheter was inserted into the left external jugular vein for injection of xenon dissolved in saline, and emboli.

**VENTILATION**

Each limb of the Carlen's tube was connected to a secondary ventilator circuit, modified from Sykes et al., which allowed the lungs to be synchronously but independently ventilated to the same pressure with separate gases (fig. 1). During expiration a known gas fills two anesthetic bags within a rigid container. The 10-cm H₂O PEEP valve remains closed while the bags fill, assuring complete separation of inspired and expired gases. When the bags are full, the rise in pressure closes one-way valves, resulting in venting of the excess gases. During the inspiratory cycle, the volume-cycled ventilator (Ohio 560°) forces a volume of gas into the rigid container, opening the 10-cm H₂O PEEP valve and displacing the same volume from the bags into the lungs. The distribution of the gas to the lungs depends on the compliance of the lung to which it is attached. A non-rebreathing mushroom valve synchronized with the primary ventilator circuit prevents contamination of expired gas with inspired gas.

**MEASUREMENT OF PERFUSION**

To measure the distribution of blood flow to each lung, we used a technique described by Arborelius.

**DISTRIBUTION OF STARCH EMBOLI**

*HYPOXIC LUNG*  
*OXYGENATED LUNG*

**Fig. 2.** Distribution of emboli to hypoxic and oxygenated lung (EMBOLI). Distribution of tissue counts between oxygenated and hypoxic lung (TISSUE). EMBOLI/TISSUE ratio in oxygenated and hypoxic lung.
$^{133}$Xe was dissolved in saline and 1 mc rapidly infused into the left jugular vein. Because of its low blood solubility, xenon diffuses into the alveolar gas and is washed out by ventilation. Immediately following the injection, expired gas from each lung was collected for 7 min, and the volume measured. A 10-ml sample of mixed expired gas collected from each lung was counted in a scintillation counter to give $^{133}$Xe cpm/ml of gas. Total xenon excreted by each lung was calculated as the volume of gas excreted multiplied by $^{133}$Xe cpm/ml. The $^{133}$Xe excreted by each lung area is proportional to its perfusion and the $^{133}$Xe excreted by the hypoxic lung divided by the total $^{133}$Xe excreted indicates the proportion of perfusion to the hypoxic lung. The model thus compares the perfusion between any two ventilated lung areas isolated by the insertion of the Carlen's double-lumen tube.

To study microemboli and blood clot emboli, dogs were divided into two main groups. One group received starch microemboli; the other received blood clot emboli. The group receiving blood clot were further divided into normocapnic and hypocapnic groups. The hypocapnic group was created, through hyperventilation, in order to reduce the degree of HPV. The relative distribution of blood flow to each lung was measured. We simultaneously monitored cardiac output and pressures and blood gas values during ventilation of each lung with air (Air–Air). One lung was then ventilated with oxygen, the other with nitrogen ($O_2–N_2$) for at least 90 min to allow stabilization of HPV, and the measurements repeated. The dogs then received emboli within 5 min of this measurement. All measurements were again repeated within 5 min of embolization.

**Starch Group**

Seven dogs were rapidly infused with a single bolus of starch particles ($63-74 \mu$) in a dose of 0.1–0.15 g/kg
through an external jugular vein. Measurements were repeated within 5 min after embolization, and the animal sacrificed. Biopsies were taken from hypoxic and oxygenated lung areas at the same level and fixed in formalin. Sections from the biopsies were stained with PAS (Periodic Acid Schiff) and examined microscopically (magnification × 100). Using techniques described by Weibel, the total number of emboli within the confines of a grid were counted. In order to relate the emboli to tissue density, the cross hair intersections lying over lung tissue were also counted. This allowed us to calculate a ratio of emboli count to lung tissue count for oxygenated and hypoxic lung tissue.

**Blood Clot Group**

Autologous blood clots were prepared by allowing a 100-ml sample of the dog's blood to clot for 2 hours. Large clots were then forced through the nozzle of a 20-ml syringe, creating clots of approximately 5 × 2 mm in size. Five normocapnic dog were rapidly infused with 0.8 ml/kg of these clots, through an external jugular vein, and five hyperventilated hypocapnic dogs received 1.14 ml/kg in order to achieve the same increase in PPA in both groups. Measurements were repeated within 5 min of embolization, and the animal sacrificed.

Results are expressed as mean ± SEM. Differences were assessed using unpaired and paired Student's t tests. Regression equations and correlations were determined using the method of least squares. P < 0.05 was considered significant.

**Results**

**Starch Emboli, Normal PACO₂ (Seven Dogs)**

The distribution of starch emboli differed in oxygenated and hypoxic lung areas (fig. 2). Twice as many...
emboli/unit tissue went to well oxygenated as to hypoxic lung areas. There was no evidence of atelectasis in the hypoxic lung areas, as the tissue counts/field were the same as in the oxygenated lung. Since the physiologic changes were in the same direction in the dogs embolized with starch or blood clot at normal PacO\textsubscript{2} levels, we shall present only physiologic data from dogs receiving blood clots.

**Blood Clot, Normal PacO\textsubscript{2} (Five Dogs)**

At normocapnic ventilation (PacO\textsubscript{2} 42.6 ± 1.2 torr), the smaller lung was ventilated with nitrogen (P\textsubscript{N2} < 25 torr) and the rest of the lung with oxygen (P\textsubscript{O2} > 650 torr). This resulted in a drop in perfusion to the hypoxic lung from 32.8 ± 1.8 (Air-Air) to 14.4 ± 2.2% (N\textsubscript{2}-O\textsubscript{2}; P < 0.001) and a rise in PacO\textsubscript{2} from 85.4 ± 5.2 to 278 ± 40 torr (P < 0.005; fig. 3). There was no significant change of P\textsubscript{PA} or in per cent ventilation to the hypoxic lung area (per cent V\textsubscript{h}) at this point.

After embolization P\textsubscript{PA} rose from 19.4 ± 0.9 to 34.4 ± 4.3 torr (P < 0.01); there was a shift in perfusion back to the hypoxic lung, 14.4 ± 2.2 to 23.0 ± 1.4% (P < 0.001), and a concomitant drop in PacO\textsubscript{2} from 278 ± 40 to 186 ± 34 torr (P < 0.005). There was no change in per cent V\textsubscript{h}. The cardiac output did not change significantly after one lung area was made hypoxic or after pulmonary emboli were infused. P\textsubscript{PA} tended to fall with time after embolization, so all measurements were made within 5 min.

**Blood Clot, Low PacO\textsubscript{2} (Five Dogs)**

These dogs were hyperventilated to a mean PacO\textsubscript{2} of 30.4 ± 1.0 torr. Then the smaller lung was made hypoxic (P\textsubscript{N2} < 25 torr), and the rest of the lung was ventilated with 100 per cent O\textsubscript{2} (P\textsubscript{O2} > 650 torr). There was a shift of perfusion away from the hypoxic lung, 34.6 ± 3.5 (Air-Air) to 31.4 ± 3.0 per cent (N\textsubscript{2}-O\textsubscript{2}; P < 0.05; fig. 4). PacO\textsubscript{2}, P\textsubscript{PA} and per cent V\textsubscript{h} remained unchanged. After embolization there was a rise in P\textsubscript{PA} comparable to that in the normocapnic blood clot group. However, unlike the normocapnic dogs, there was no shift in perfusion or drop in PacO\textsubscript{2}. There was again no significant change in Q (cardiac output) or per cent V\textsubscript{h} after embolism.

**Discussion**

In our model both alveolar hypoxia and infusion of emboli caused shifts in lung perfusion. We postulate that the mechanisms involved in the shifts in perfusion are as follows: HPV increases the vascular resistance in the hypoxic lung, decreasing its perfusion, hence protecting it from embolization (fig. 2). The emboli act as fixed obstructions, predominantly in the oxygenated lung. As the cardiac output stayed constant, blood was redirected through the hypoxic lung. The increase in P\textsubscript{PA} attenuated the effect of HPV and increased the perfusion through the constricted pulmonary vascular bed.

Our experimental model allows us to measure both ventilation and perfusion to a lung area in an intact animal. Ventilation with pure nitrogen is different than hypoventilation. Hypoventilated lung areas have an elevated alveolar PacO\textsubscript{2} as well as hypoxia. Ventilation with N\textsubscript{2} washes out CO\textsubscript{2} from the hypoxic lung. The low alveolar PacO\textsubscript{2} decreases the vasoconstriction response to hypoxia. Therefore, our model underestimates the shift in perfusion created by hypoventilation and should influence distribution.

In our normocapnic dogs, induction of hypoxia decreased perfusion to that lung area to less than half (fig. 3). This order of magnitude correlates well with previously reported studies showing reduction of perfusion to hypoxic lung performed on isolated lungs.
noted that their patients showed an inverse relationship between post-embolic PA and Pao2.

The results of this study indicate that in our model the hypoxemia that occurs after pulmonary embolism is predominantly due to the attenuation of the effect of HPV by the pulmonary hypertension which occurs after pulmonary embolization. There is evidence in the literature that this mechanism could also account, at least in part, for hypoxemia after pulmonary embolism in patients.

The authors thank G. Caskenette, E. Jansen and C. Mindorff for their valuable technical assistance, Dr. J. Othrazek for his valuable suggestions regarding the use of 133Xenon to measure lung perfusion, and Dr. K. Kovacs for his help with the pathological studies.

References