The Hemodynamic Basis of Exercise Intolerance in Tricuspid Regurgitation

Mads J. Andersen, MD, PhD; Rick A. Nishimura, MD; Barry A. Borlaug, MD

**Background**—Patients with severe tricuspid regurgitation (TR) frequently present with exertional fatigue and dyspnea, but the hemodynamic basis for exercise limitation in people with TR remains unclear.

**Methods and Results**—Twelve subjects with normal left ventricular (LV) ejection fraction and grade ≥3 TR underwent high-fidelity invasive hemodynamic exercise testing with simultaneous expired gas analysis and were compared with 13 age- and sex-matched controls. At rest, TR subjects had lower pulmonary blood flow (3.6±0.4 versus 5.1±1.9 L/min; P=0.01), increased right atrial pressure (12±5 versus 4±1 mmHg; P=0.0002), and higher pulmonary capillary wedge pressure (17±5 versus 9±3 mmHg; P=0.0001). However, LV transmural pressure (pulmonary capillary wedge pressure−right atrial pressure), which reflects LV preload independent of right heart congestion and pericardial restraint, was similar in TR and controls (6±3 versus 4±2 mmHg; P=0.3). With exercise, TR subjects displayed lower peak VO2 (10.3±2.8 versus 13.8±4.2 mL/min per kg; P=0.02), lower pulmonary blood flow (6.4±1.3 versus 10.3±3.3 L/min; P=0.001), and less increase in pulmonary blood flow relative to VO2 (+4.6±1.1 vs +6.2±0.7; P=0.001). TR subjects displayed higher pulmonary capillary wedge pressure with exercise, but this was solely because of RA hypertension (27±9 versus 8±3 mmHg; P<0.0001), because LV transmural pressure dropped with exercise in subjects with TR (−5±6 versus +3±3 mmHg; P=0.0007), suggesting inadequate LV diastolic filling, despite high pulmonary capillary wedge pressure.

**Conclusions**—Impaired exercise capacity in people with severe TR is related to low cardiac output reserve relative to metabolic needs, coupled with elevated systemic and pulmonary venous pressures. Left heart pressures are elevated with exercise in subjects with TR, despite low LV preload, secondary to enhanced ventricular interaction. (Circ Heart Fail. 2014;7:911-917.)

Key Words: exercise ■ heart failure ■ hemodynamics

Tricuspid regurgitation (TR) is a common valvular lesion that is usually caused by ventricular and annular dilatation.12 The prevalence of moderate to severe TR increases with age, affecting >5% of women aged >70 years,1 and is associated with increased mortality, independent of left heart and pulmonary vascular disease.2 People with TR are often asymptomatic, but with more advanced disease, patients complain of exertional fatigue, edema, and anorexia.1 Development of TR may reduce symptoms of orthopena and nocturnal dyspnea in people with left heart disease,3 but it has increasingly been recognized that exertional dyspnea is a common complaint in TR.2 Tricuspid valve surgery is generally performed when there is coexisting left-sided valve disease, and the role for intervention on isolated TR remains unclear.6

**Clinical Perspective on p 917**

Improved understanding of the hemodynamic basis of exercise intolerance in TR might better inform current approaches to treatment. Exertional fatigue in TR is widely believed to be caused by low cardiac output1,2,6 based on invasive studies performed at rest1 and noninvasive exercise studies.7 However, impaired cardiac output reserve with exercise has never been directly proven in TR, and its mechanisms remain unclear. The causes of exertional dyspnea in TR also remain obscure, because the primary lesion sits upstream of the pulmonary capillary–alveolar interface. However, left heart filling pressures may increase even in the absence of left heart disease when there is right heart congestion and pericardial restraint, as in TR.8

To better understand the hemodynamic basis for impaired exercise tolerance in TR, we performed invasive hemodynamic cardiopulmonary exercise testing in patients with moderate and severe TR in the absence of significant left heart or pulmonary vascular disease and compared them with age- and sex-matched controls without TR or heart failure (HF).
Methods
Consecutive patients with symptomatic grade 3 or 4 TR (exertional dyspnea and fatigue) and no significant left heart disease undergoing exercise hemodynamic catheterization at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, MN, from 2002 to 2014 were included. Patients with left ventricular (LV) dysfunction (ejection fraction [EF] <45%), significant left-sided valvular disease (>mild), significant pulmonary hypertension (>mild), pulmonary parenchymal disease, prior chest radiation, infiltrative cardiomyopathies, pericardial disease, and congenital heart disease were excluded. TR severity was graded by echocardiography in accordance with current guidelines. Control subjects frequency-matched by age, sex, and body size were referred for invasive exercise assessment for dyspnea but had no demonstrable cardiac pathology after thorough clinical evaluation and invasive hemodynamic assessment, including normal rest and exercise pulmonary artery (PA) pressures (rest <25 mmHg; exercise <40 mmHg) and normal pulmonary capillary wedge pressure (PCWP; rest <15 mmHg; exercise <25 mmHg).

Clinical data were abstracted from the medical charts. Two-dimensional and Doppler echocardiography was performed according to American Society of Echocardiography guidelines by experienced sonographers and cardiologists with grading of TR severity according to established criteria. Right ventricular (RV) length and diastolic diameters were measured at the base and mid-ventricle perpendicular to septum, and tricuspid annular dimension was measured in the apical 4-chamber view. RV function was assessed by systolic annular tissue velocity of the lateral tricuspid annulus (s') and tricuspid annular plane systolic excursion. The study was approved by the Mayo Clinic institutional review board, and all subjects provided written informed consent for review of their medical records. There were no eligible participants who refused to provide consent.

Hemodynamic Assessment
Subjects were studied on chronic medication in the fasted state, after minimal sedation in the supine position as previously described. Right heart catheterization was performed using a 7F catheter through a 9F sheath via the internal jugular vein. Transducers were leveled and zeroed at the phlebostatic axis, measured by laser calipers. Pressures in the right atrium (RAP), PA, and PCWP positions were measured at end expiration, taking the average of 3 beats in sinus rhythm and ≥5 in atrial fibrillation (AF). RAP and PCWP was measured mid A wave for subjects in sinus rhythm and at mid C wave for subjects with AF. PCWP position was confirmed by fluoroscopy, characteristic pressure waveforms, and oximetry (saturation >94%). A 4F to 6F cannula was placed in the radial artery for continuous systemic arterial blood pressure recordings and sampling of arterial blood gases. Ventricular interdependence was defined by an increase in RV (or PA) systolic pressure during inspiration coupled with a decrease in systemic arterial pressure. Pressure tracings were recorded continuously throughout each study, digitized (240 Hz), and stored for offline analysis.

Oxygen consumption (VO2) was measured using breath-by-breath expired gas analysis (MedGraphics, St Paul, MN). Arterial–venous O2 difference (A-V O2 diff) was measured directly as the difference between systemic and PA O2 content (ABL80; Radiometer Medical, Brønshøj, Denmark). Pulmonary blood flow (Qp) was calculated using the direct Fick method (Qp=VO2/A-V O2 diff). Stroke volume was determined by Qp/heart rate. Pulmonary vascular resistance (IPa mean–PCWP)/Qp, systemic vascular resistance (mean blood pressure–RAP)x80/Qp), and transpulmonary gradient (PA mean–PCWP) were determined using standard formulas. LV transmural pressure (LVTMP), which more accurately reflects LV preload independent of right heart filling and pericardial restraint, was calculated as PCWP–RAP.

After baseline data were acquired, hemodynamic assessment and expired gas analysis were performed during supine cycle ergometry, starting at 20 W workload, increasing by 10 W increments in 3-minute stages to subject-reported exhaustion.

Statistical Analysis
Data are reported as means±SD for normally distributed or median (interquartile range) for non-normally distributed variables. Unless specifically indicated, there was no missing data for any variables. Between-group differences were tested using a 2-sample independent t test, 2-sided. Fisher exact test, or Wilcoxon rank-sum test. Within-group differences were compared using a paired t test. Multivariable linear regression analysis was used to adjust for relevant baseline group differences in β-blocker use and the prevalence of AF. For non-normally distributed variables entered into regression models, the assumption of normally distributed residuals was verified by Quantile plots, and no violations were observed. All tests were 2-sided, and a P value <0.05 was considered significant. Statistical analyses were performed using JMP 10.0.0 (SAS Institute, Cary, NC).

Results
Patients with TR and age-, sex-, body size–matched controls were predominantly older women with history of systemic hypertension (Table 1). Subjects with TR were more likely to have AF and be treated with rate control medications such as β-blockers and diuretics. There was no statistically significant difference in the prevalence of other comorbidities. Patients with TR had higher N-terminal pro-brain natriuretic peptide and direct bilirubin levels compared with controls, whereas other laboratory variables did not differ significantly.

The majority of TR subjects had severe (grade 4) TR (83%), which was predominantly because of functional TR (92%). Patients with TR displayed larger RV and tricuspid annular dimensions and impaired RV function compared with controls (Table 1). LV size and function was similar in TR patients and controls.

Baseline Hemodynamics
Compared with controls, TR subjects had higher right and left heart filling pressures, with higher PA pressures and pulmonary vascular resistance (Table 2). RA tracings in TR patients showed prominent C–V waves, with ventricularized waveforms (absence/Descent) in 60%, and a positive Kussmaul sign (increase or absent decrease in RAP with deep inspiration) in 73% (Table 2; Figure 1A). The majority (83%) of TR patients displayed enhanced ventricular interdependence at rest, whereas this finding was absent in controls. Although PCWP was higher in TR patients than controls, LVTMP was similar in the 2 groups. LV end-diastolic pressure (LVEDP) was measured in 6 TR subjects and was identical to PCWP at rest (15±5 versus 15±5 mmHg; P=0.9). There were no significant group differences in resting heart rate, blood pressure, or resting VO2. Cardiac output, stroke volume, and mixed venous O2 content were significantly lower, whereas A-V O2 diff was higher in TR subjects compared with controls at rest (Table 2).

Exercise Hemodynamics
Compared with controls, exercise capacity was impaired in TR patients manifest as lower peak VO2 (Table 3; Figure 2). This was related to impaired cardiac output reserve in TR compared with controls, because of both lower stroke volume and heart rate. In contrast, patients with TR developed a higher peak A-V O2 diff with exercise. The increase in Qp relative to metabolic work performed was lower in TR compared with controls (4.6±1.1 versus 6.2±0.7 mL/min; P=0.001; Figure 3A), whereas the increase in A-V O2 diff relative to work...
performed was enhanced (12.3±2.9 versus 7.6±2.4 min/dL; P<0.001; Figure 3B), indicating impaired cardiac O₂ delivery with enhanced peripheral O₂ extraction to partially compensate for inadequate perfusion. These differences persisted after adjusting for AF and β-blocker use.

Figure 1 shows representative hemodynamic tracings from a patient with TR and a control at rest and with stress. Exercise PCWP was higher in TR than in controls (Table 3), although the exercise change in PCWP did not significantly differ between cases and controls (Figure 2). Patients with TR developed 3-fold greater increase in RAP compared with controls, and 80% of TR patients displayed a Kussmaul sign and ventricularization of the RAP tracing during exercise (Table 3; Figures 1 and 2). LVEDP during exercise was assessed in 4 TR subjects and was identical to PCWP (24±6 versus 25±6 mm Hg; P=0.9).

### Table 1. Baseline Characteristics

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### Table 2. Baseline Hemodynamics

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<td>PA mean pressure, mm Hg</td>
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### Discussion

This is the first study to evaluate the hemodynamic mechanisms underlying exercise intolerance in patients with significant TR. Impaired exercise capacity in patients with TR was related to an inability to adequately increase cardiac output with stress in proportion to metabolic needs. Abnormal cardiac output reserve was coupled with marked increases in both right- and left-sided filling pressures during exercise. However, the increase in left heart pressures in TR patients appeared to be predominantly...
related to diastolic ventricular interaction, because LV TMP dropped with exercise, consistent with inadequate LV preload, despite pulmonary venous hypertension. Further study is required to determine whether interventions to correct isolated TR might improve cardiac output reserve and abrogate exercise-induced congestion in patients with symptomatic HF.

TR is a common lesion that often coexists with other cardiovascular diseases. This confounds determination of which hemodynamic derangements are specific to TR, as opposed to any comorbid left heart or pulmonary vascular disease. Indeed, in various circumstances, TR may act as a mediator, contributor, or even barometer of HF severity. To allow for more focussed insight into the specific hemodynamic effects of TR, we excluded subjects with significant left heart disease and pericardial restraint, LVEDP and LV end-diastolic volume were normal at rest and with exercise, and PCWP consistently exceeds RAP.

Frank–Starling principal is explainable by LV TMP, which increases with right heart unloading because RAP decreases more than PCWP. In the current study, the opposite phenomenon was observed during exercise-related increases in venous return in TR. These findings are similar to prior observations in a canine model of pulmonary embolism, where acute saline loading decreased LV stroke work even as LVEDP increased—because LV end-diastolic volume was compromised by right heart distention.

Pericardial pressure is difficult to measure clinically but can be accurately estimated by RAP. In patients with isolated LV HF, LV TMP is elevated, in striking contrast to TR patients in the current study, who displayed similar LV TMP to controls. With exercise, PCWP increased further in TR patients, to levels observed in patients with HF and preserved EF (HFrEF), but in striking contrast to HFrEF patients, LV TMP significantly decreased in TR patients, suggesting low LV preload despite elevation in PCWP. This was likely caused by the combination of poor RV output (lower Qp) and acute right heart dilatation, although the latter possibility cannot be addressed in this study as echocardiography was not performed simultaneous with catheterization. Even as LV TMP was reduced, pulmonary venous pressure was elevated with exercise in TR patients, which likely contributes to symptoms of exertional dyspnea in this population.

Hansing and Rowe first demonstrated that right heart congestion in TR was associated with reduced cardiac output at rest, becoming lower as the regurgitation severity progressed from mild to severe. In the latter study, the
The Qp impairment at rest identified by Hansing and Rowe has been speculated to explain symptoms of fatigue with exercise in people with TR, although this has never been directly shown. Groves et al observed lower peak VO2 in patients with TR, which they interpreted to represent a cardiac output limitation. However, according to the Fick principle, VO2 is equal to the product of cardiac output (Qp) and A-V O2 diff, and these individual components were not measured in their study. Importantly, VO2 is strongly associated with the intensity of work performed, thus the observed impairment in VO2 in TR patients could be attributed to either diminished Qp reserve or premature cessation of exercise because of increased filling pressures or other factors.

To discern the role of Qp reserve limitation in determining aerobic limitation, both Qp and VO2 must be directly measured. In normal humans, each 1 mL/min increase in VO2 is met with a 6 mL/min increase in Qp—defining the adequacy of cardiac perfusion relative to metabolic requirements. Although this normal exercise factor was observed in the control population of the current study (6.2±0.7 mL/min/L), patients with TR displayed 35% lower increases in Qp relative to VO2 (4.6±1.1; P=0.001 versus control), indicating inadequate cardiac output reserve. To compensate for inadequate perfusion, patients with TR relied more heavily on O2 extraction (increased A-V O2 diff). This cardiac output reserve limitation with exercise is similar to what was observed in people with left-sided HF, but in contrast to the latter myocardial disorders, the mechanical nature of the lesion in TR suggests that it may be more amenable to intervention. The presence of moderate or greater TR is associated with increased risk of death, independent of left heart disease and pulmonary hypertension, and further studies are warranted to determine whether surgical correction of TR may correct the hemodynamic perturbations associated with TR and allow for improved symptoms and survival.

The prevalence of moderate to severe TR increases strikingly with age, to 5.6% among women aged >70 years in population-based studies. Although the directional causality remains unclear, significant TR is clearly associated with AF. TR causes RA enlargement because of pressure and volume overload, increasing the risk of developing AF, whereas AF may cause RA enlargement with tricuspid annular dilatation and secondary functional TR. Thus, a vicious

### Table 3. Exercise Hemodynamics

<table>
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<th>Controls (n=13)</th>
<th>TR (n=12)</th>
<th>PValue</th>
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<td>Heart rate, beats per min</td>
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<td>99±22*</td>
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<td>Mean blood pressure, mm Hg</td>
<td>111±19*</td>
<td>99±15*</td>
<td>0.1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Central pressures

- Mean RA pressure, mm Hg: 8±3* vs 27±9*; <0.0001
- RA W wave, mm Hg: 11±4* vs 38±12*; <0.0001
- Kussmaul sign, n (%): 0 (0) vs 10 (83); <0.0001
- Ventricularized RA tracing, n (%): 0 (0) vs 10 (83); <0.0001
- Mean PCWP, mm Hg: 16±4* vs 27±8*; 0.0003
- LVTMP, mm Hg: 7±3* vs 1±6*; 0.003
- RA/PCWP ratio: 0.6±0.2 vs 1.0±0.2; <0.0001
- PA systolic pressure, mm Hg: 45±8* vs 61±13*; 0.002
- PA mean, mm Hg: 30±5* vs 38±11*; 0.03

Vascular function

- Transpulmonary gradient, mm Hg: 15±5* vs 11±7; 0.2
- PVR, Wood units: 1.5±0.6 vs 1.8±1.1; 0.4
- SVR, dynes/s×cm5: 898±307* vs 905±198*; 0.9

### A-V O2 diff indicates arterial–venous oxygen; LVTMP, left ventricular transmural pressure; PA, pulmonary artery; PCWP, pulmonary capillary wedge pressure; PVR, pulmonary vascular resistance; Qp, pulmonary blood flow; RA, right atrial; SVR, systemic vascular resistance; and TR, tricuspid regurgitation.

*p<0.05 vs baseline for within-group comparison; paired t-test.

**Figure 2.** Hemodynamic changes with exercise in subjects with tricuspid regurgitation (TR; red bars) and controls (black bars) showing increases in oxygen consumption (ΔVO2), cardiac output (ΔQp), arterial–venous O2 difference (ΔA-V O2 diff), pulmonary capillary wedge pressure (ΔPCWP), right atrial pressure (ΔRAP), and left ventricular transmural pressures (ΔLVTMP). Error bars reflect SEM. Differences between changes in the 2 groups were tested by 2-sample independent t test.
circle ensues wherein regurgitation begets fibrillation and vice versa. In the present study, the majority of TR subjects were older women with AF, and it is unclear if the current results can be generalized to people with TR in the absence of AF.

Ventricular interdependence is bidirectional, making it difficult to prove that pressure–volume changes in one side of the heart are altering properties of the other side, or vice versa. This raises the possibility that LV diastolic dysfunction (as in people with HFpEF) may also increase right heart pressures via interdependence. In the current study of TR patients, the fact that RA pressures increased much more with exercise compared with PCWP provides strong support for our interpretation that right heart overload is the driving problem. Indeed, this observation is in striking contrast to what is observed in HFpEF, where RA pressures increase by 0.4 mmHg for each 1 mmHg increase in PCWP.11 TR risk factors, including older age, female sex, and AF, are also prominent risk factors for HFpEF, which may present with identical symptoms. In these patients, careful assessment for hemodynamically significant TR is warranted, because the treatments may differ.

Limitations
Cases and controls were matched for age, sex, and body size, but TR subjects were more likely to be in AF and more likely to be treated with β-blockers, which may have influenced exercise capacity and hemodynamics. However, this would be unlikely to account for the dramatic differences in cardiac output reserve or the differences in right and left heart filling pressures and LVTMP with exercise. Additionally, the primary findings remained significant after adjusting for AF and β-blocker use. The sample was drawn from a catheter laboratory referral population, which may limit generalizability of these findings. The control population was not truly normal in that they had some prevalent medical comorbidities and by virtue of the fact that they were referred for invasive hemodynamic stress testing, although any abnormalities in the control subjects likely would bias our results toward the null. Participants were encouraged to exercise to maximal volition, but peak VO₂ obtained in the supine position with catheters in place is much lower than would be seen in the absence of instrumentation in the upright position, and it is likely that many of the patients did not achieve true objective maximal workload. Importantly, true maximal workload is not necessary to this analysis, because cardiac output responses were normalized to the amount of metabolic work performed, which is a major strength of this study. Echocardiography was not performed during exercise, precluding any analysis of acute changes in RV size and function as well as TR severity during exercise. Tricuspid annular measurements may underestimate the severity of RV dysfunction in patients with severe TR, thus the true differences in RV function between TR subjects and controls might have been underestimated.

Figure 3. A, Compared with controls (black solid line), the increase in cardiac output (Qp) relative to metabolic demand (VO₂) was impaired in tricuspid regurgitation (TR) patients (red dashed line). P value reflects comparison of the slope of increase in Qp relative to VO₂. B, Although systemic oxygen content was similar at rest and with exercise, mixed venous O₂ contents were lower at baseline and during exercise in TR, resulting in larger arterial–venous O₂ (A–V O₂) differences. Asterisks reflect P<0.0001 between groups for A–V O₂ difference at each time point. Error bars reflect SEM.

Figure 4. Compared with controls (black solid line), tricuspid regurgitation (TR) subjects (red dashed line) displayed less increase in cardiac output (Qp) despite greater increases in pulmonary capillary wedge pressure (PCWP; A) and right atrial pressure (RAP; B). However, effective left ventricular distending pressure (transmural pressure; LVTMP; C) decreased in TR compared with controls, indicating relative LV underfilling with stress despite high PCWP. Error bars reflect SEM. P values reflect differences between slopes of the 2 groups tested using 2-sample independent t test.
Conclusions

Impaired exercise capacity in patients with significant TR is caused by impaired cardiac output reserve relative to metabolic needs. This impairment in cardiac output reserve is coupled with a drop in effective LV distending pressures, despite the development of pulmonary venous hypertension, which may contribute to symptoms of dyspnea in addition to fatigue related to poor cardiac output reserve.

Disclosures

None.

References


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Clinical Perspective

Tricuspid regurgitation (TR) is a relatively common valvular lesion that is associated with increased morbidity and mortality. Patients with TR typically present with exertional dyspnea and fatigue, but the hemodynamic mechanisms underlying these symptoms remain unclear. In this study we performed invasive hemodynamic assessment at rest and during maximal effort exercise with simultaneous expired gas analysis. We demonstrate that TR patients have significant impairment in cardiac output during exercise relative to metabolic demand. This impairment in perfusion is coupled with abnormal increases in pulmonary capillary wedge pressure that is related to right heart congestion and diastolic ventricular interaction rather than a primary left heart lesion. These data provide greater insight into the hemodynamic basis for exercise intolerance in TR and emphasize the need to consider TR as a potential cause of exertional dyspnea in patients with normal left ventricular ejection fraction and high pulmonary capillary wedge pressure on activity. Further research is required to determine the optimal indications and timing of tricuspid valve surgery in patients with significant TR.
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Data Supplement (unedited) at:
http://circheartfailure.ahajournals.org/content/suppl/2014/09/04/CIRCHEARTFAILURE.114.001575.DC1
Supplemental Table 1: Pressure Data averaged over the entire respiratory cycle

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<tr>
<td>PA systolic pressure (mmHg)</td>
<td>45±7</td>
<td>55±13</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RA, right atrial; PCWP, pulmonary capillary wedge pressure; LVTMP, left ventricular transmural filling pressure; PA, pulmonary arterial