CASE REPORT

A Case of Dabigatran-associated Acute Renal Failure
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ABSTRACT
Dabigatran is a direct thrombin inhibitor that reduces the risk of systemic embolism in patients with nonvalvular atrial fibrillation. We report a case of an elderly man who developed unexplained rapid decline in renal function 6 weeks after starting dabigatran. A renal biopsy was planned to determine the cause of renal failure. However, the patient had significantly abnormal coagulation parameters, and we were faced with the clinical dilemma of the need for an urgent renal biopsy vs uncertainty regarding how much time should be allowed to pass before performing a renal biopsy after stopping the medication. Eventually, renal biopsy showed renal atheroembolic disease, which was possibly precipitated by dabigatran. Though rare, renal atheroembolic disease has been described following treatment with warfarin, heparin and thrombolytic agents.2-5 To our knowledge, this is the first reported case of renal atheroembolic disease potentially caused by dabigatran. This case also highlights the extended duration of prolonged coagulation parameters after holding dabigatran and its implication for timing of nonemergent invasive procedures.

INTRODUCTION
Dabigatran, a direct thrombin inhibitor, is the first available oral anticoagulant alternative to warfarin for reducing the risk of stroke and systemic embolism in patients with nonvalvular atrial fibrillation.1 We report a case of an elderly patient who developed unexplained acute renal failure 6 weeks after he started dabigatran. A renal biopsy was planned to determine the cause of renal failure. However, the patient had significantly abnormal coagulation parameters, and we were faced with the clinical dilemma of the need for an urgent renal biopsy vs uncertainty regarding how much time should be allowed to pass before performing a renal biopsy after stopping the medication. Eventually, renal biopsy showed renal atheroembolic disease, which was possibly precipitated by dabigatran. Though rare, renal atheroembolic disease has been described following treatment with warfarin, heparin and thrombolytic agents.2-5 To our knowledge, this is the first reported case of renal atheroembolic disease possibly induced by dabigatran.

A 79-year-old African American man was referred to an outpatient nephrology clinic for evaluation of renal dysfunction discovered incidentally during a routine follow-up the week before. His blood urea nitrogen (BUN) was 52 mg/dL (Ref: 9-23 mg/dL), serum creatinine (Cr) was 2.9 mg/dL (Ref: 0.7-1.3 mg/dL), and estimated glomerular filtration rate (eGFR) was 27.2 ml/min/1.73 (Ref: > 60 ml/min/1.73). He had fatigue but no other symptoms. Three months previously, his Cr was 1.3 mg/dL, eGFR was 69 ml/min/1.73 and hemoglobin was 11.0 g/dL (Ref: 12.5-16.5 g/dL) with normal white blood cell differential. His past medical history included hypertension, hyperlipidemia, and a recent diagnosis of atrial fibrillation. His medications included amlodipine 5 mg daily, valsartan 320 mg daily, rosuvastatin 10 mg daily, vitamin D 2000 units daily, and dabigatran 150 mg twice a day, started 6 weeks earlier for atrial fibrillation by his cardiologist. He had undergone no interventional procedures. On physical examination, his blood pressure was elevated at 179/79 mm Hg. Laboratory tests revealed normal white blood cell count and differential, as well as normal platelet count and electrolytes. Hemoglobin was low at 10.0 g/dL. Urinalysis showed 1+ protein and > 20 red blood cells/high power field (hpf) (Ref: < 2/hpf). Urine protein to creatinine ratio was 0.5 (Ref: 0.0-0.2). Repeat BUN was 50 mg/dL, Cr was 3.3 mg/dL, and eGFR was 22 ml/min/1.73.

Urgent renal ultrasound with Doppler was ordered. However, on the day of the renal ultrasound, the patient's blood pressure was severely elevated at 243/109 mm Hg, prompting hospital admission. His hospitalization occurred 5 days after he was first
on hemodialysis on day 8 of hospitalization due to worsening renal function and abnormal coagulation parameters. Placement of a temporary femoral hemodialysis catheter was uneventful despite prolonged aPTT, PT/INR and TT. A renal biopsy was performed on day 12 of hospital admission. There was no major post-procedure bleeding. Renal biopsy showed cholesterol emboli, ischemic glomerular changes, and hypertensive glomerulosclerosis (Figure 1). Dabigatran was permanently discontinued. The patient continued on hemodialysis, but renal function did not recover.

DISCUSSION
Renal atheroembolic disease, also known as cholesterol embolization, causes a decline in renal function due to occlusion of renal arteries, arterioles, and glomerular capillaries by cholesterol crystals, which dislodge from atherosclerotic plaques. In clinical practice, 3% to 10% of all cases of acute renal failure may be attributed to renal atheroembolic disease. Renal atheroembolic disease is usually found in adults older than 60 years with diffuse atherosclerosis. The most common etiology is an interventional or surgical procedure involving manipulation of the aorta or other major blood vessels. Renal atheroembolism is also a rare complication in patients on anticoagulants (including warfarin, heparin, low molecular weight heparin) and thrombolytic agents. In studies of biopsy-proven renal atheroembolic diseases, anticoagulation could be implicated in only 7% of cases without preceding vascular interventional procedures. Among patients taking warfarin, the incidence of systemic cholesterol embolism is low (0.7% to 1.0%). The exact mechanism underlying anticoagulant- or thrombolytic-induced atheroembolic renal disease is not clear. One proposed explanation is that anticoagulants and thrombolytics may disrupt or dissolve protective thrombi that cover ulcerated atherosclerotic plaques, exposing the lipid core to the systemic circulation. Spontaneous atheroembolic disease is rare with reported incidence of 1.9% to 13.2%.

The patient in this case report has risk factors for atherosclerosis including advanced age, history of hypertension, and hyperlipidemia. Though spontaneous atheroembolic disease is a possibility in our patient, the temporal relationship between starting dabigatran and onset of renal failure in the absence of any vascular interventional procedure makes it likely that dabigatran was the predisposing factor in this patient. To our knowledge, this is the first reported case of renal atheroembolic disease potentially induced by dabigatran.

Table 1. Coagulation Parameters, Serum Creatinine, and Timing of Hemodialysis and Renal Biopsy in Patient after Hospitalization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>PT/INR (0.8-1.2)</th>
<th>aPTT (23-32s)</th>
<th>TT (11.8-17.6s)</th>
<th>SCR (mg/dL)</th>
<th>Procedure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>66.1</td>
<td>&gt;120</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>HD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>&gt;120</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>HD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>65.7</td>
<td>&gt;120</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>HD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>&gt;120</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Biopsy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.3</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.8</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td></td>
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<td>12</td>
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<td>4.1</td>
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Abbreviations = PT/INR, prothrombin time/international normalized ratio; aPTT, activated partial thromboplastin time; TT, thrombin time; SCR, serum creatinine; HD, hemodialysis.
The most common extra-renal manifestation of atheroembolic renal disease is skin involvement in the form of livedo reticularis, blue toe syndrome, ulceration, gangrene, and purpura, with recent studies reporting a frequency of 75% to 96%. Other organs, including the retina, gastrointestinal tract, central nervous system, and heart also may be affected. Our patient exhibited no extra-renal manifestations but had eosinophilia, which was suggestive but not specific for renal atheroembolic disease. Overall, the patient’s clinical presentation was not suggestive of renal atheroembolic disease. But comprehensive evaluation for other causes of renal failure was unremarkable and renal biopsy was conclusive, which is the definitive test to diagnose atheroembolic disease.

An additional highlight of our case is the patient’s abnormal coagulation profile and its impact on our decision to delay renal biopsy and initiate dialysis prior to renal biopsy. Dabigatran is primarily cleared by the kidneys (85%). The manufacturer recommends holding dabigatran for 1 to 2 days (if creatinine clearance > 50 ml/min) and 3 to 5 days (if creatinine clearance < 50 ml/min) before any interventional or surgical procedure. However, in our patient, coagulation parameters, including PT/INR, PTT, and TT were prolonged well beyond 5 days, which made us hesitant to perform renal biopsy on day 5.

Routine monitoring of the coagulation profile in patients taking dabigatran is not indicated, but it may be essential in special circumstances like this case. The effect of dabigatran on coagulation parameters has been the subject of several recent studies and reviews. In the latest study, aPTT and hemoclot thrombin inhibitor assay were found to be the most useful monitoring tests, with the latter regarded as the gold standard. Ecarin clotting time inhibitor assay were found to be the most useful monitoring tests, while TT was considered too sensitive with the latter regarded as the gold standard. Ecarin clotting time has been found to be reliable, while TT were prolonged well beyond 5 days, which made us hesitant to perform renal biopsy on day 5.

We felt it was probably safe to perform renal biopsy after holding dabigatran for 12 days and after 3 hemodialysis sessions. There were no post-procedure complications.

**CONCLUSION**

Dabigatran may induce renal atheroembolic disease in elderly patients with appropriate risk factors for atherosclerosis. This diagnosis should be considered in patients who develop unexplained renal failure while taking dabigatran. Additional case reports of renal atheroembolic disease in setting of dabigatran may confirm that this disease can be induced by dabigatran like other anticoagulants and thrombolytics.

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**REFERENCES**

Quiz: A Case of Dabigatran-associated Acute Renal Failure

EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES
Upon completion of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Understand some of the pharmacology of dabigatran and how its activity can be monitored.
2. Understand the etiology and pathophysiology of renal atheroembolic disease.

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QUESTIONS

1. Dabigatran is a direct thrombin inhibitor.
   - True   - False

2. Dabigatran is indicated to reduce the risk of systemic embolism in patients with atrial fibrillation due to valvular heart disease.
   - True   - False

3. Renal atheroembolic disease, also known as cholesterol embolization, causes a decline in renal function due to occlusion of renal arteries, arterioles, and glomerular capillaries by cholesterol crystals, which dislodge from atherosclerotic plaques.
   - True   - False

4. In clinical practice, almost half of all cases of acute renal failure may be attributed to renal atheroembolic disease.
   - True   - False

5. The most common extra-renal manifestation of atheroembolic renal disease is skin involvement in the form of livedo reticularis, blue toe syndrome, ulceration, gangrene, and purpura.
   - True   - False

6. The most common cause of renal atheroembolic disease is a result of an interventional or surgical procedure involving manipulation of the aorta or other major blood vessels.
   - True   - False

7. Renal atheroembolic disease is a not uncommon complication following treatment with warfarin, heparin and thrombolytic agents and can be implicated in more than 20% of cases without preceding vascular interventional procedures.
   - True   - False

8. Spontaneous atheroembolic disease is rare with reported incidence of 1.9% to 13%.
   - True   - False

9. The exact mechanism underlying anticoagulant- or thrombolytic-induced atheroembolic renal disease is not clear; however, one proposed explanation is that anticoagulants and thrombolytics may disrupt or dissolve protective thrombi that cover ulcerated atherosclerotic plaques, exposing the lipid core to the systemic circulation.
   - True   - False

10. Renal atheroembolic disease is usually found in adults older than 60 years with diffuse atherosclerosis.
    - True   - False

11. Dabigatran is primarily cleared by the liver.
    - True   - False

12. The prothrombin time/international normalised ratio (PT/INR) is recommended for use in monitoring dabigatran activity in clinical practice.
    - True   - False

13. The thrombin time (TT) is considered too sensitive to monitor dabigatran activity; however, a normal TT rules out any dabigatran effect.
    - True   - False

14. Hemodialysis is not effective in removing dabigatran.
    - True   - False

15. The authors of this case report suggest that dabigatran may induce renal atheroembolic disease in elderly patients with appropriate risk factors for atherosclerosis.
    - True   - False
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