Impact of Posttransplant Diabetes Mellitus on Outcome After Transplantation

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Abstract

New-onset diabetes mellitus or glucose intolerance may develop frequently after kidney transplantation. Patients of African American or Hispanic ethnicity, recipients with polycystic disease, hepatitis C virus carriers, cadaver transplant recipients, older patients, and those with pretransplant glucose abnormalities are more susceptible to posttransplant diabetes mellitus. Also, immunosuppressive therapy is a strong factor for the development of posttransplant diabetes mellitus. Calcineurin inhibitors, anti-mammalian target of rapamycin agents and corticosteroids can all predispose to diabetes with different mechanisms. There is a mass of evidence that posttransplant diabetes mellitus is a main risk factor for cardiovascular events. The morbidity and mortality are increased when posttransplant diabetes mellitus is associated with one or more traditional risk factors. However, in transplant patients a number of other factors may also increase the risk for cardiovascular morbidity. Of particular relevance are the donor source, the metabolic syndrome, the life style, and anemia. Posttransplant diabetes mellitus not only is a main cause of cardiac complications, but it can also affect graft survival, particularly in the long term. Measures to prevent posttransplant diabetes mellitus and its consequences include early diagnosis of diabetes mellitus and of cardiovascular complications, tailored immunosuppression, and dietetic-hygienic recommendations, particularly in obese and elderly patients. (Trends in Transplant. 2007;1:104-12) Corresponding author: Mariarosaria Campise, campise@policlinico.mi.it

Key words

Posttransplant diabetes mellitus. Cardiovascular risk. Outcome.
Introduction

Transplantation confers the highest survival benefit among the different renal replacement therapies, but renal transplant recipients have a high mortality rate mainly due to cardiovascular (CV) complications secondary to accelerated atherosclerosis. Risk factors for cardiovascular disease (CVD) in the general population, such as hypertension, hyperlipidemia, and cigarette smoking, are predictive of increased CV risk also among transplanted patients; in addition, the development of new onset diabetes mellitus (DM) dramatically elevates this risk. The incidence, risk factors, and clinical relevance of posttransplant diabetes mellitus (PTDM) vary among reports. Variation in the incidence may be explained partially by differences in the definition, follow-up times, race, and immunosuppressive therapy. However, according to the American Diabetes Association (ADA) criteria for diagnosis of DM, up to 25% of renal transplant recipients can develop diabetes in the first few years after transplantation and the incidence progressively increases with the duration of the follow-up. Risk factors for development of PTDM include: African American and Hispanic ethnicity, age at transplantation, deceased kidney donor, hepatitis C infection, autosomal dominant polycystic kidney disease, abnormal glucose metabolism before transplantation, and the immunosuppressive therapy. Posttransplant diabetes mellitus is caused by the simultaneous presence of insufficient insulin secretion due to the direct toxic effect of most immunosuppressive drugs (calcineurin inhibitors, rapamycin-derived compounds) on the pancreatic β-cells, together with insulin resistance (reduced tissue response with normal insulin levels) favored by specific therapies (corticosteroid, tacrolimus), or as a condition present before transplantation that is worsened by therapy, obesity, or renal insufficiency. After kidney transplantation, insulin sensitivity increases, but remains significantly lower in patients with PTDM who also have reduced fasting insulin levels when compared to normoglycemic patients.

Assessing the cardiovascular risk

Although progresses in diagnosis, prevention, and treatment have improved the life expectancy of renal transplant patients with diabetes, the risk of fatal or nonfatal CV events, in particular from cardiac infarct, remains two to three times higher for diabetic than for nondiabetic transplant recipients. Several mechanisms may contribute to accelerated atherosclerosis and CV disease in patients with type 2 diabetes. They include elevated levels of serum triglycerides and very low-density lipoprotein cholesterol, hyperinsulinemia, glycation of lipoproteins, hyperglycemia, and renal dysfunction. On the other hand, not only overt diabetes but also glucose intolerance may contribute to the formation of atherosclerotic plaque by causing glycation of low-density lipoprotein cholesterol and favoring a procoagulant state. Silent myocardial infarct is relatively frequent in diabetic transplant patients. Cardiomyopathy may also develop in diabetics with an apparently normal heart and with normal coronaryography. Peripheral obliterative arteriopathy is frequent. Apart from CV complications, diabetes may also expose transplant patients to retinopathy, neuropathy, foot ulcers, and infections.

The actual prevention of CV disease relies on the reduction of the overall absolute risk. The traditional CV risk factors derived by Framingham studies are widely used in the general population, but cannot fully explain the increased incidence of CV events among renal transplant recipients. In these patients, the predictive value of this risk calculator can be modified by survival bias or nontraditional risk factors such as hyperho-
mocysteinemia. In a recent study, the predictive value of the Framingham Heart Study calculator proved to be excellent for transplanted patients with a low coronary risk, predicting 11 coronary events for 10 expected, but by contrast it was underestimating the coronary events in high-risk patients: 16 events for seven expected. This may be explained by the impact of nontraditional CV risk factors such as C-reactive protein, fibrinogen, albumin, creatinine clearance and urinary protein excretion in the high-risk patients accounting for the 6.4% incidence of observed CV events versus 2.8% expected. The presence of PTDM was associated with a relative risk (RR) of 1.34 for adverse events in the Cox regression analysis. After adjusting for confounding variables (age, serum C-reactive protein level, and serum high-density lipoprotein concentration), the RR was not significantly modified.

As pointed out before, also the presence of hyperglycemia without an overt diabetic status is related to CVD and mortality. Using the ADA definition for the diagnosis of diabetes, Cosio assessed the incidence of hyperglycemia after transplantation and tried to determine the risk for CV complications in these patients. At the end of the first month after transplantation, impaired fasting glycemia and PTDM were present in 163 (34%) and 68 (14%) patients, respectively, without changes in the percentages at the end of the first year. Fasting glucose levels > 100 mg/dl were significantly associated with a higher incidence of posttransplant cardiac and peripheral vascular disease events. Since some of the patients with hyperglycemia or PTDM at the first month were no longer hyperglycemic during the follow-up, the incidence of CV events was significantly higher in patients with persistent PTDM but not in those who returned normoglycemic. The incidence of CV events in patients with resolved PTDM was 10%, compared to 11% for normoglycemic patients and 23% for patients with PTDM.

Donor source

A number of variables may contribute to the deleterious effects of PTDM on CV morbidity. The donor source has a well-known impact on long-term patient and graft survival. Long-term survival of patients receiving a living-donor kidney transplantation is significantly higher than non living-donor recipients. Factors that explain such a favorable outcome are: the quality of the kidney itself, the lower ischemia-reperfusion injury that may reduce the upregulated expression of human leukocyte antigens on endothelial and tubular cell, the avoidance of the cytokine and chemokine storm caused by brain death, and finally, the reduced incidence of acute and chronic rejection. Some organ and recipients characteristics such as younger age, less dialysis time if any, less immunologic complications, lower steroid use, and better adherence to prescriptions may explain the lower incidence of PTDM in living transplantation. In a study on 1349 patients receiving 1400 living-kidney transplants, aimed at evaluating the risk factors for death with a functioning graft, the cumulative incidence of PTDM was 9.6%. Of 131 patients who died with a functioning graft, 30 had PTDM and 20.4% of them died within the first year. At multivariate analysis, PTDM failed to be associated with death. However, deaths due to CV events were analyzed separately without any mention of the causes of death among PTDM patients. One can only assume that other non-referred comorbidities must have played an important role on the outcome.

The metabolic syndrome

Overt diabetes and glucose intolerance are often associated with the metabolic syndrome (MS). The concept of MS was introduced in 1988 by Reaven, et al. The diagnosis of MS requires the presence of three or more of the following criteria: vis-
cereal obesity (waist circumference > 102 cm for men and > 88 cm for women), hypertension (blood pressure > 130/80 or use of antihypertensive medication), dyslipidemia (serum triglycerides > 1.70 mmol/l, serum high-density lipoprotein cholesterol < 103 mmol/l in men and 129 in women) and abnormal fasting glucose levels (> 6.1 mmol/l), with insulin resistance as the common abnormality. Several studies linked the MS with CV risk and diabetes to the general population and to the presence of renal disease. In a recent study, transplant patient survival was significantly lower in the presence of MS. Patients with MS were significantly older, received an older donor kidney, and had a longer follow-up. A limitation of this study is that the definition of MS did not include high-density lipoprotein cholesterol, thus leading to an underestimation of the prevalence of the MS among this cohort of patients. The second point that needs to be taken into account is the limited number of events (a total of eight deaths), which precluded a multivariate analysis of patient survival. Nevertheless, although retrospective, the study has the importance of evidencing MS as a cluster of potentially modifiable risk factors for PTDM, chronic graft dysfunction, and graft loss in renal transplant recipients.

**Lifestyle**

Unhealthy, modifiable lifestyle practices can increase the CV risk. In a population of 214 patients with a 10% incidence of PTDM, the overall 16% prevalence of CV events was higher in the PTDM group: 33% compared with 19% for the pretransplant DM. The pretransplant DM patients had a higher hemoglobin A1c and a higher pretransplant body mass index than the PTDM group. The PTDM patients, instead, were smokers (36 vs. 0%) and this sole significant difference seems to explain the increased CV events in the PTDM group, possibly through the increase of microinflammation markers and the increased need for antihypertensive and hypolipidemic drugs.

**Anemia**

Anemia may also contribute with PTDM to CVD. In a European cross-sectional survey involving 4263 transplanted patients in 16 countries, anemia (defined as hemoglobin levels < 13 g/dl for men and < 12 g/dl for women) is reported with a prevalence of 38.6%. Although 8.5% of patients were severely anemic, treatment was given only to 17.8% of them. In other studies using different thresholds and times of measurement, anemia after transplantation ranged between 20 and nearly 40%, being very common especially among African American patients. There is a strong association between hemoglobin levels and poor graft function, but additional transplant-associated factors also contribute to anemia development. Among them, bone marrow suppression, either drug-related (angiotensin converting enzyme inhibitors/angiotensin receptor blockers, mofetil mycophenolate, azathioprine, sirolimus) or infection-related (parvovirus B19), female sex, folate and vitamin B12 deficiency, malignancy, erythropoietin resistance, and absolute (mainly blood loss) or functional (uremia or chronic inflammation) iron deficiency. Low ferritin (< 100 ng/ml) has been detected in 50% of transplanted anemic patients with chronic kidney disease (CKD) stage 3-5 but not in stage 1. Anemia develops earlier, more frequently, and more severely in patients with diabetic kidney disease. Reduced hemoglobin levels independently identify patients with increased CV morbidity and mortality, hypertension, and microvascular complication. However, anemia is not a risk factor for any outcome in diabetic patients, but becomes a risk factor for adverse outcome if CKD is present. The association CKD/anemia has a hazard ratio
(HR) of 1.7 for composite outcome (myocardial infarction/fatal coronary heart disease), 1.81 for stroke, and 1.88 for all-cause mortality. To the best of our knowledge, there is no study making the same correlation with PTDM patients. But as PTDM is similar to type 2 DM, we can reasonably assume that the appearance of anemia in patients with PTDM may have the same unfavorable impact in the presence of kidney graft dysfunction. In a recent, single-centre, five-year prospective study designed as a follow-up of 503 patients with type 2 diabetes, in addition to standard management, a full blood count was obtained at each routine visit. No intervention was undertaken to modify hemoglobin levels. At baseline, 12% of patients had anemia, and 13% developed anemia during follow-up. Overall hemoglobin levels decreased by 0.07 ± 0.01 g/dl/year. In patients with anemia managed conservatively, hemoglobin levels decreased by 0.09 ± 0.03 g/dl/year and this decrease was associated with hemoglobin A1c levels, but not with renal function. The greatest decreases in hemoglobin levels were seen in patients with micro-albuminuria, renal impairment, or established macrovascular disease at baseline. Patients with an estimated glomerular filtration rate > 90 ml/min/1.73 m² or normal albuminuria had stable hemoglobin levels during the five-year follow-up. The authors conclude that anemia is the endpoint of a process that begins with the initiation of vascular damage. These studies show that anemia is an important nontraditional risk factor for increasing CV events in high-risk populations such as PTDM patients. Prospective studies are needed to establish if early anemia correction can achieve a reduction of CV events in transplant recipients.

**Homocysteine**

Homocysteine (Hcy) is an atherogenic amino acid that is associated with increased risk of ischemic heart disease also in general population. The presence of moderate hyperhomocysteinemia is an independent risk factor for CVD among renal transplant recipients. Hyperhomocysteinemia is inversely related to graft function. The increase of 1 µmol/l of Hcy increases the risk of CVD by 6%. The mean plasma total Hcy (tHcy) level is usually low or normal in DM patients. However, when nephropathy is present the tHcy levels tend to be higher than in non-DM patients. An independent association with tHcy and CVD was shown in retrospective studies for DM patients. Prospective studies showed an association between elevated tHcy and all-cause mortality in DM patients. In general, the association between elevated levels of tHcy and the outcome was stronger in non-DM individuals for all types of study. In a prospective study assessing the potential role of PTDM in the development of atherosclerotic adverse events in transplanted patients, the presence of tHcy levels > 21 µmol/l was directly associated with adverse events, carrying a relative risk of 4.67. The correction of hyperhomocysteinemia with high vitamin B₁₂ doses or with folic acid has not yet proven to be associated with a CVD risk reduction. The ongoing FAVORIT (Folic Acid for Vascular Outcome Reduction in Renal Transplantation) trial will probably address this question, but until then there is no evidence that treating moderate hyperhomocysteinemia can be really useful.

**Impact on graft function**

The development of PTDM is not devoid of consequences on the allograft outcome. In a series, the 12-year graft-survival rate in diabetic patients was as low as 48% compared to 70% in transplant patients without PTDM. At Cox regression analysis, PTDM was a significant predictor of graft loss, carrying a relative risk of 3.72, independently of age, sex, and race. In another study, glyc-
mic levels one year after transplantation did not significantly relate with graft survival, but were related to higher uncensored graft survival\textsuperscript{23}. Porrini, et al.\textsuperscript{32} analyzed the prevalence of MS and its evolution to diabetes, influence on graft function, graft and patient survival, and the relevance of each MS component on the outcome. This retrospective analysis was conducted on 230 patients with a minimum follow-up of 18 months beyond one year posttransplant who received a deceased-donor kidney between 1995 and 2001. Metabolic syndrome was diagnosed in 37.7% of patients at baseline and was significantly associated with the development of PTDM during follow-up. Components associated with this complication were higher body mass index and triglyceride levels. Metabolic syndrome was an independent risk factor for decreasing inverse serum creatinine, with a hazard ratio of 2.6 for a 30% decrease in $1/\text{creatinine}$. Graft survival was significantly lower among patients with MS at univariate analysis as well as at multivariate Cox analysis, with a hazard ratio of 3-4.5 in different models. On the other hand, not all the components of the MS contribute equally to the impaired long-term graft function. In a multivariate analysis conducted by de Vries, et al.\textsuperscript{47}, only systolic blood pressure and hypertriglyceridemia were independently associated with impaired renal allograft function beyond one year after transplantation.

Preventive measures

Prevention of any complication is by far the best way to avoid it. However, preventive measures are not always easy to apply, particularly with PTDM in which only a few factors contributing to its development are modifiable. The only potentially successful preventive measure on non-modifiable factors is an early diagnosis and, among the modifiable ones, a tailored immunosuppression in high-risk patients.

The impact of early diagnosis on CV disease is not well described. In a prospective observational study, the long-term effects of early diagnosed PTDM on major adverse cardiac events (MACE) and patient survival was investigated. Three months after transplantation and during a period of 16 months, diabetes and CV risk factors were assessed in 201 consecutive kidney transplant recipients. Follow-up data were obtained from the national (Norwegian) registry. The eight-year cumulative incidence of MACE was 7% in recipients without diabetes, 20% in patients with PTDM, and 21% in patients diabetic before transplantation. Proportional hazard regression analyses showed that patients with PTDM had an approximately three-fold increased risk of MACE as compared with nondiabetic patients. Eight-year patient survival was 80% in the nondiabetic group, 63% in the PTDM group, and 29% in the DM group, respectively. Pretransplant diabetes (HR: 5.09), age (HR: 1.03), cytomegalovirus (CMV) infection (HR: 2.66) and creatinine clearance (HR: 0.98), but not PTDM (HR: 1.20), were independent predictors of death in the multiple Cox regression model. Early diagnosed PTDM has been demonstrated to be a predictor of MACE, but not of all-cause mortality in the first eight years after renal transplantation\textsuperscript{48}.

Posttransplant DM and its long-term complications have emerged as major adverse effects of immunosuppression, responsible for increased morbidity and mortality among solid-organ transplant patients and particularly kidney transplanted patients\textsuperscript{49,50}. The mechanisms through which immunosuppressants exert their diabetogenic effect are different, though. Cyclosporine and tacrolimus cause PTDM, decreasing insulin secretion via a direct toxic effect on the pancreatic $\beta$-cells\textsuperscript{51,52}. For corticosteroids, the induction of insulin resistance seems to be the predominant factor\textsuperscript{53}. Still controversial is the action of rapamycin-derived com-
The development of PTDM has also emerged as a major concern among selected populations such as elderly and obese patients who are a growing number in transplant waiting lists and are both already at increased risk of CV disease. A number of modifiable factors have been identified for intervention in these patients. Pretransplantation dietary restriction and exercise to achieve a correct body weight are strongly recommended. After transplantation, tight blood pressure control, early hyperlipidemia treatment, and the choice of an immunosuppressive therapy with minimal effects on glucose metabolism can also reduce the risk of PTDM. Attempts to modify doses and regimens of tacrolimus and corticosteroids, especially when used in combination, or even to avoid them have been successful, but should be considered before transplantation after balancing the therapy against the occurrence of rejection. New-onset DM has decreased from 20 to 1.4% when tacrolimus is used at reduced doses and in monotherapy. The incidence of PTDM with mTOR inhibitor therapy has been reported in some 10% of cases with calcineurin inhibitor (CNI) avoidance immunosuppressive schedules. On the contrary, when conversion treatment is done after CNI avoidance, the effect on glucose metabolism seems to be more detrimental than positive; shift to rapamycin would produce an increased insulin resistance together with a higher number of new-onset diabetes.

**Conclusion**

Although patient and graft survival is continuously improving, some degree of mortality risk remains as a consequence of comorbid conditions that may be present at transplantation or develop thereafter. Among the latter, the new onset of DM brings a negative impact on long-term outcomes. Transplant specialists and patients should both take responsibility in the management if this complication develops. Correction of potentially modifiable factors, early diagnosis, and tight glycemic control are mandatory in ameliorating the overall health status and reducing the risk of late graft failure and mortality.

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come of new onset diabetes mellitus in 2078 patients divided in two groups according to the year of transplantation: before and after 1995. PTDM increases with the time probably because of the changing of patients characteristics and the introduction in 1995 of a better absorbed CsA formulation with consequent higher blood levels and cumulative exposure.


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