THE CAUSE OF ARTERIAL HYPOXEMIA AT REST IN PATIENTS WITH “ALVEOLAR-CAPILLARY BLOCK SYNDROME”


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THE CAUSE OF ARTERIAL HYPOXEMIA AT REST IN PATIENTS WITH "ALVEOLAR-CAPILLARY BLOCK SYNDROME"*

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Hypoxemia in patients with "alveolar-capillary block syndrome" is believed to be due to a barrier to the diffusion of oxygen caused by thickened alveolar and capillary membranes (1, 2). Theoretical considerations indicate that thickened membranes should not result in a Po2 difference between alveolar gas and pulmonary capillary blood when patients with impaired diffusion breathe 100 per cent O2. Inhalation of O2, therefore, should always correct hypoxemia in patients in whom a barrier to diffusion is the only defect. The reasoning is as follows: inhalation of O2 at sea level raises alveolar Po2 to about 670 mm Hg, and the large initial Po2 difference between alveolar gas and blood entering the pulmonary capillaries (600 to 630 mm Hg) causes a rapid diffusion of O2 across even thickened alveolar-capillary membranes and prompt saturation of the hemoglobin (3, 4). After hemoglobin is saturated with O2, the O2 behaves like an inert gas and enters the blood only in physical solution and almost instantaneously, so that blood leaving the pulmonary capillaries is in equilibrium with the Po2 in the alveolar gas.

Our original plan was to test this theory by measuring directly the arterial Po2 of patients with "pure" alveolar-capillary block syndrome while they were breathing pure O2. If the theory is correct (and if pulmonary artery-to-vein shunts are not increased in these patients) the arterial Po2 should equal that of healthy subjects breathing pure O2 (620 to 650 mm Hg). On analysis of our data we realized that the arterial hypoxemia in patients with alveolar-capillary block syndrome was due to uneven ventilation-blood flow relationships and increased vein-to-artery shunts rather than to a barrier to diffusion of O2. This led us to conclude that pulmonary disease rarely alters alveolar-capillary membranes uniformly throughout the lung and, therefore, uneven ventilation-blood flow relationships must occur. Non-uniform distribution of gas and blood, we believe, represents an important cause of arterial hypoxemia in patients with "impaired diffusion."

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

We studied 11 patients with diseases in which the primary defect was alveolar-capillary block (Table I). The diagnosis was made on clinical grounds, X-ray and pulmonary function tests in all, by lung biopsy in four (E.S., J.R., O.B., P.S.), by lymph node biopsy in two (J.W., B.F.), and at autopsy in one (J.B.). The results of pulmonary function studies are shown in Table II. All the patients had slight to marked reduction in vital capacity and total lung capacity, normal or low arterial blood Pco2, normal 7-minute nitrogen washout (5), normal or elevated alveolar ventilation, decreased diffusing capacity as determined by the single-breath CO test (6), and maximal flow rates considerably in excess of those characteristic of obstructive pulmonary disease such as asthma or emphysema. Pulmonary compliance was measured in four; in all of these it was below normal.

Each patient was then studied by the technique described by Finley (7) for the determination of uneven ventilation-blood flow distribution in the lungs. Briefly, the technique consists of a) continuous measurement of arterial Po2 during nitrogen washout by a Clark O2 electrode inserted in a flow-through cuvet, and b) simultaneous measurement of Pao2 and Pco2 in inspired and expired gas at the mouthpiece. From these measurements the (A-a) Po2 difference due to "absolute" shunt can be calculated (4), and curves can be drawn which describe the ventilation-blood flow relationship through well and poorly ventilated regions of the lungs. We calculated the mixed capillary O2 saturation during breathing of air, assuming that the distribution of ventilation and blood flow through the lungs was the same as that calculated during O2 breathing, and that the cardiac output remained the same. This calculation is similar to that made by Briscoe (8) for patients with emphysema.

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The saturation drop due to shunts during inhalation of O₂ was then subtracted to give the calculated arterial saturation. This final value represents the arterial saturation resulting only from unevenness of ventilation and perfusion and vein-to-artery shunts in the lung. In Patients A.W. and J.B. this calculation was carried out only during the initial study and not later in the course of their illness (the calculation of unevenness of pulmonary blood flow in the presence of large pulmonary artery-to-vein shunts may be inaccurate).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient</th>
<th>VC</th>
<th>TLC</th>
<th>SBo₂</th>
<th>7-min N₂ washout</th>
<th>PDS/Vt</th>
<th>VA</th>
<th>PacO₂</th>
<th>Dco</th>
<th>MEFR</th>
<th>MIFR</th>
<th>Cl</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>J.W.</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>333</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F.F.</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S.</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>125</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.R.</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td></td>
<td>40</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R.R.</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>273</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.F.</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>250</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.S.</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O.B.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>150</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P.S.</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.W.</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>230</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.B.</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>250</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* VC = vital capacity; TLC = total lung capacity; SBo₂ = rise in N₂ concentration between 750 and 1,250 ml expired after a single breath of pure O₂; PDS = physiological dead space; Vt = tidal volume; VA = alveolar ventilation; PacO₂ = arterial CO₂ tension; Dco = breath-holding diffusing capacity for CO at rest; MEFR and MIFR = maximal expiratory and inspiratory flow rates; Cl = lung compliance.
Patients A.W. and J.B. were studied late in the disease. 

$P_{b}$ was assumed to be 47 mm Hg in all cases; $P_{AO2}$ is calculated from measured $P_{b}$, $P_{AN2}$ (4 mm in all cases), $P_{AO2}$ and assumed $P_{b}$. 

**RESULTS**

The highest arterial blood $Po_2$ for each of these patients during the inhalation of $O_2$ is shown in Table III. Compared with the arterial $Po_2$ of normal subjects during pure $O_2$ breathing (8), the (A-a) $Po_2$ difference is within normal limits in Patients F.F., E.S., J.R., R.R., B.F., A.W., and J.B when studied initially (the second values for A.W. and J.B. represent studies late in the course of their disease). This proves that the theoretical considerations are indeed correct; i.e., when the $Po_2$ is increased to high levels in the alveolar gas, there is no (A-a) $Po_2$ difference except that due to normal venous admixture (pulmonary artery-to-vein shunts, bronchial and thebesian venous drainage into the postpulmonary capillary circulation).

The data show, in addition, that some patients with alveolar-capillary block have more than the normal flow through anatomic shunts (J.W., H.S., O.B., P.S.). In the two subjects who later succumbed to their disease (A.W. and J.B.), there was a marked increase in the flow through shunts. We do not know whether this is due to actual development of pulmonary artery-to-vein shunts or to continued blood flow to regions with no ventilation (obstructed airways).

Of even greater interest is that when 10 of the 11 patients were breathing air their measured arterial $O_2$ saturations agreed well with those calculated on the basis of uneven ventilation to blood flow ratios (Table IV); this indicates that their anoxemia can be explained entirely on the basis of uneven distribution without invoking the factor of impaired diffusion. Late in the disease process, venous admixture became the dominant factor in causing arterial hypoxemia. The single-breath $O_2$ test (9) was abnormal in 8 of the 11 patients, which suggests uneven distribution of ventilation in time as well as in regions of the lung. This asynchrony of emptying reflects an uneven distribution of alveolar compliances and resistances, undoubtedly related to uneven dis-

**TABLE IV**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient</th>
<th>$%VA$</th>
<th>$%Qc$</th>
<th>$VA/Qc$</th>
<th>$ScO_2$</th>
<th>$%VA$</th>
<th>$%Qc$</th>
<th>$VA/Qc$</th>
<th>$ScO_2$</th>
<th>Calc. $ScO_2$/ $Sao_2$</th>
<th>Calc. $Sao_2$</th>
<th>Observed $Sao_2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>97.5</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>97.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>97.0</td>
<td>97.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.W.</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>99.0</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>95.0</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>93.5</td>
<td>94.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F.F.</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>98.0</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>86.0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>93.0</td>
<td>95.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S.</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>98.0</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>88.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>90.5</td>
<td>91.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.R.</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>97.5</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>96.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>96.5</td>
<td>97.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R.R.</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>97.5</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>96.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>97.0</td>
<td>97.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.F.</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>97.5</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>95.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>95.0</td>
<td>93.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.S.</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>98.5</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>91.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>92.0</td>
<td>94.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O.B.</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>98.0</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>95.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>95.0</td>
<td>95.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P.S.</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>97.5</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>91.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>94.0</td>
<td>91.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.W.</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>97.5</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>89.0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>92.0</td>
<td>93.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.B.</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>97.5</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>97.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>97.0</td>
<td>92.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $VA$ = alveolar ventilation to region; $Qc$ = pulmonary capillary blood flow to region; $ScO_2$ = saturation of the end-capillary blood leaving region; $ScO_2$ (mixed) = saturation of the mixed end-capillary blood; $Sao_2$ = difference in saturation between mixed end-capillary and arterial blood due to anatomical shunts.
tribution of thickening of alveolar-capillary membranes.

**DISCUSSION**

It has recently been pointed out that patients with alveolar-capillary block may have considerable overventilation of some regions of the lung (10) and overperfusion of others (11). Our data suggest that this unequal distribution of ventilation and perfusion and venous admixture account for the hypoxemia of these patients at rest. Because of this, we believe that the usual concept that thickened alveolar-capillary membranes cause arterial hypoxemia at rest because of impairment of O₂ diffusion should be modified.

To illustrate this, we have calculated the effect on the O₂ diffusing capacity, DLo₂, of increasing the thickness of the alveolar-capillary membranes. We used the equation (12)

\[
\frac{1}{D_{Lo_2}} = \frac{1}{D_M} + \frac{1}{\theta V_c}
\]

where \( D_M \) is the diffusing capacity of the membrane, \( \theta \) is the oxyhemoglobin reaction rate constant, and \( V_c \) is the pulmonary capillary blood volume. This equation allows us to calculate the effect of increasing the thickness of the alveolar-capillary membranes, assuming that the diffusing coefficient of the membranes remains unchanged when their thickness is increased. Normally the resistance to diffusion through the membranes is about equal to the resistance to diffusion offered by the red blood cell. If \( D_{Lo_2} \) equals 20 ml per minute per mm Hg Po₂, and if we assume that the membrane is 1 μ thick, then doubling the thickness would halve \( D_M \), according to Fick's first law (12). This would result in decreasing \( D_{Lo_2} \) to 13.3 ml per minute per mm Hg Po₂. If \( \theta V_c \) is decreased correspondingly, \( D_{Lo_2} \) would be reduced to 10 ml per minute per mm Hg Po₂. The effect on \( D_{Lo_2} \) of increasing membrane thickness, with \( \theta V_c \) constant, is shown graphically by the hyperbolic curve of Figure 1. These values are deduced from data of the kinetics of the reaction \( Hb + O_2 \rightarrow HbO_2 \) for human erythrocytes at various levels of O₂ saturation when applied to a forward type of Bohr integration (13). The calculations indicate that there is a large safety factor for the diffusion of O₂ (14); \( D_M \) can be reduced to one-sixth to one-eighth of its normal value before a measurable (1 mm Hg) (A-a) Po₂ difference due to impaired diffusion occurs, all else kept constant.

It is important to consider what increasing the thickness of the membrane to 6 to 8 μ does to the resting volume of alveoli. The normal range of alveolar diameter is 60 to 300 μ (15). The reduction in volume would be approximately 60 per cent for the smaller alveoli and 20 per cent for those in the middle range. If the alveolar-capillary membranes were not thickened uniformly, some of the smaller alveoli could be completely filled, and their capillaries might act as pulmonary artery-to-vein shunts (16).

Uneven thickening of alveolar-capillary membranes would have important effects on the distribution of ventilation. Compliance of fibrotic alveoli would be decreased because of stiffening of their walls and because of their reduced size (17). Both factors would reduce the ventilation to the affected alveoli.

If the perfusion of these affected alveoli was not reduced proportionately, hypoxemia of the arterial blood would occur because of uneven ventilation-perfusion relationships and venous admixture. The data presented here suggest that this is the case.

An analysis of the course of O₂ uptake in the pulmonary capillaries by the method of Staub, Bishop and Forster (13), which is based on single-breath Pco data and the reaction kinetics of O₂ and red blood cells, agrees with the present conclusion. They calculated that, under a wide variety of conditions in healthy subjects and in
patients with impaired diffusion, no significant desaturation (alveolar to end-capillary Po2 difference), due to diffusion, results.

SUMMARY

1. Hypoxemia in 11 patients with a clinical diagnosis of alveolar-capillary block syndrome could be explained on the basis of uneven distribution of ventilation in relation to blood flow and pulmonary artery-to-vein shunting; the latter factor became more important late in the course of the illness.

2. Uneven changes in compliance of alveoli could account for the uneven ventilation.

3. The increase in pulmonary artery-to-vein shunting could result from the complete filling of some air spaces with the thickened alveolar capillary membranes.

REFERENCES


