Echocardiography was useful in evaluating unexplained syncope


**QUESTION**
What role does echocardiography have in determining the causes of unexplained syncope?

**DESIGN**
18-month cohort study.

**SETTING**
Emergency department (ED) and inpatient services of a university hospital in Geneva, Switzerland.

**PATIENTS**
650 consecutive patients who were ≥18 years of age (mean age 60 y, 54% women) and presented to the ED with the main symptom of syncope (sudden loss of consciousness and of postural tone with spontaneous recovery). Follow-up was 95% at 18 months.

**DIAGNOSTIC STRATEGY**
The initial diagnostic workup included a standardized clinical evaluation; baseline laboratory tests; 12-lead electrocardiography (ECG); and testing for orthostatic hypotension. Selected additional testing was done based on abnormal findings after the initial workup. Patients in whom the cause of syncope remained undetermined received serial cardiovascular diagnostic tests: bidimensional Doppler transthoracic echocardiography, bilateral carotid sinus massage, prolonged monitoring with ECG, and passive upright tilt testing. Electrophysiologic studies were done on the basis of current recommendations. Echocardiography findings considered to be diagnostic of syncope were severe aortic stenosis, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy with outflow tract obstruction, severe pulmonary artery hypertension, and left atrial myxoma or thrombus with protrusion and outflow tract obstruction. An abnormal, relevant, but nondiagnostic finding was reduced left ventricular ejection fraction (LVEF) ≤40%.

**MAIN OUTCOME MEASURE**
Final diagnosis.

**MAIN RESULTS**
The initial evaluation identified probable causes of syncope in 495 patients (76%). 8 of 20 patients (40%) with suspected aortic stenosis (murmur and suggestive history) had severe stenosis on echocardiography, and no more cases were diagnosed during follow-up. Of 155 undiagnosed patients, cardiovascular testing identified cardiac causes (ventricular tachycardia, atrioventricular block, and sinus bradycardia or pause) in 24 patients (16%) and noncardiac causes (vasovagal, hypotension, and carotid sinus hypersensitivity) in 22 (14%). The echocardiography result was normal (n = 50) or nonrelevant (n = 17) in all patients with a negative cardiac history and a normal ECG result (n = 67 [43%]). In those with a positive cardiac history or an abnormal ECG result (n = 88 [57%]), echocardiography was normal or nonrelevant in 64 patients (73%) and showed systolic dysfunction (LVEF ≤40%) in 24 patients (27%). Of the patients with normal or nonrelevant findings, 19% had a final diagnosis of arrhythmia, whereas 50% of those with LVEF ≤40% had a final diagnosis of arrhythmia.

**CONCLUSION**
In patients with unexplained syncope, echocardiography was useful in stratifying risk in patients with a positive cardiac history or abnormal results on electrocardiography.

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For correspondence: Dr. F.P. Sarasin, Hôpital Cantonal, Geneva, Switzerland. E-mail francois.sarasin@hcuge.ch.

The findings of the study by Sarasin and colleagues support the ACC/AHA guidelines, which recommend that echocardiography be done in patients with syncope and clinically suspected heart disease and those with pericardial syncope (3). The guidelines also state that the usefulness of echocardiography in patients without findings suggestive of cardiac disease is less well established and emphasize the need for a prospective study (3). The study by Sarasin and colleagues is the first such study and is an important addition to the medical literature in this regard.

Theodore J. Kolias, MD
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA

**References**