

**ACUTE AND CHRONIC
ATRIAL REMODELING IN
OBSTRUCTIVE SLEEP APNOEA:
IMPLICATIONS FOR
ATRIAL FIBRILLATION**

By

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A thesis submitted to the University of Adelaide in
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

December 2011

Dedicated to
My Mother
My Father
&
My wife Rhiannon

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ABSTRACT

Atrial fibrillation (AF), the most common sustained arrhythmia, has been well studied; however, its underlying mechanisms and relationships to other disease processes have not been fully explored. Observational data from epidemiological studies have suggested a relationship between obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA) and AF. Recent clinical studies have implicated an adverse outcome to therapy in patients with AF and OSA. Despite several candidate mechanisms advanced, the acute and chronic changes to the atrial myocardium have not been fully characterised.

This thesis evaluates symptomatic patients with AF presenting for radiofrequency ablation of their arrhythmia. The acute and chronic electrophysiological and electroanatomical atrial substrate is characterised. Finally the effect on clinical outcomes of therapy directed at AF is evaluated with specific reference to the presence of OSA.

Chapter 2 demonstrates the differences in the atrial substrate in paroxysmal and persistent AF. This study found persistent AF was associated with a reduction in electrogram voltage and greater signal fragmentation, with these two attributes being negatively associated.

Chapter 3 examines patients presenting with symptomatic AF, previously not known to have sleep disordered breathing. OSA was associated with a greater symptomatic burden of AF as well as chronicity of the arrhythmia. In the presence of more severe OSA, there was a greater chance of failure of radiofrequency ablation in maintaining sinus rhythm.

Chapter 4 characterises the underlying atrial substrate resulting in AF in patients with moderate to severe untreated OSA. OSA patients had larger atria, greater areas of low voltage and areas of electrical silence, suggesting loss of atrial myocardium. There were also markedly reduced conduction velocities, longer corrected sinus node recovery times and more conduction abnormalities characterised by complex electrograms. These findings provide important insights into the adverse remodeling that may allow AF to develop and persist in these patients, and promote the failure of ablation strategies.

Chapter 5 examines nocturnal atrial electrophysiological alterations resulting from acute episodes of respiratory disturbance associated with hypopnoea and obstructive apnoea events the night after undergoing radiofrequency ablation for AF. Dynamic changes in effective refractory period (ERP), conduction times and conduction delay along linear catheters were documented. The changes appeared to be more marked for obstructive apnoeas than hypopnoeas. This study suggests a dynamic, pro-arrhythmic electrical substrate that could potentially lead to nocturnal triggering of AF and its maintenance.

Finally, Chapter 6 describes an *ex-vivo* rabbit model, created to examine the acute effects of hypoxia (moderate and severe) and hypercapnia. Left atrial ERP, conduction time and conduction heterogeneity were studied using a customised microelectrode array. During hypoxia, there was a dose dependent increase in ERP with only partial resolution on restoration of baseline oxygen levels. With hypercapnia, there was a slower rise in ERP that did not appear to recover. Slowing of conduction was most noted in severe hypoxia, with

only partial resolution in recovery. In hypercapnia, there was progressive slowing of conduction into recovery. Conduction heterogeneity was also increased in the presence of hypoxia and hypercapnia. These findings further suggest complex alterations to the atrial electrophysiology in the presence of hypoxia and hypercapnia, with dynamic changes to in refractory periods, conduction times and heterogeneity.

Together, a greater understanding of the acute and chronic effects of OSA on AF, and an appreciation of the failure of ablation strategies in the presence of this breathing disorder is attained. This paves the way for further studies on the mechanisms involved, and on the potential role for continuous positive airway pressure therapy (CPAP) in the management of patients with OSA and AF.

DECLARATION

This work was performed by the candidate at the Centre for Heart Rhythm Disorders at the University of Adelaide and Royal Adelaide Hospital, South Australia (during the years 2007 through 2011).

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968. The author acknowledges that copyright of published works derived from this thesis (specifically, chapter 4) resides with the copyright holder of those works.

Hany Dimitri, Michelle Ng, Anthony G. Brooks, Pawel Kuklik, Martin K. Stiles, Dennis H. Lau, Nicholas Antic, Andrew Thornton, David A. Saint, Doug McEvoy, Ral Antic, Jonathan M. Kalman, Prashanthan Sanders. Atrial remodeling in obstructive sleep apnea: Implications for atrial fibrillation . *Heart Rhythm*. 2011;9:321-327

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December 2011

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Prashanthan Sanders, my primary supervisor and mentor, for the opportunity to complete this PhD. I would also like to thank Dr Glenn Young, my secondary supervisor, for his patient help, particular with the collection of data. It has been a privilege, pleasure and honour to work with this internationally acclaimed group of doctors, scientists and auxiliary staff. The group as a whole, under the leadership of Professor Sanders, have a most admirable dedication to research and furthering knowledge in cardiac arrhythmias, with a special focus on atrial fibrillation.

I am especially grateful to Professor Ian Wilcox for introducing me to the world of obstructive sleep apnoea and its cardiovascular associations, as well as awakening my mind to the wonders of medical research. It was his constant reinforcement of the importance of this breathing condition, especially its association with atrial fibrillation, that encouraged me to pursue further studies in the area. I am thankful for his encouragement and continued mentorship.

During the writing up period of this work, I was supported, encouraged and guided by Associate Professor David Richards. I am extremely grateful for his extraordinary patience, understanding and counselling, without which this project would have been more difficult to complete.

I am grateful for the financial support by means of research grants from the Cardiac Society of Australia (year one), and the Heart Foundation and National Health and Medical Research Council (years two and three). I am eternally grateful to the patients who agreed to

participate in these studies, in particular, those who endured extra procedural time to allow collection of data. I am most grateful to those select patients who agreed to participate in an overnight evaluation of their atrial electrophysiology as this necessitated a full night of intervention after their ablation procedure.

I am thankful to my colleagues and in particular, Fellows in the Electrophysiology department of the Royal Adelaide Hospital. It was an absolute delight to work with and enjoy the support of Martin Stiles, Bobby John, Dennis Lau, Gautam Sharma, Narayanan Namboodiri, Darryl Leong, Hany Abed, Muayad Alasady, and Han Lim. I must especially mention Dr Mitra Masoumeh for assisting with the collection of echocardiographic data. Special mention goes to Dr Anthony Brooks for his hard work and superlative knowledge, especially in the area of statistics. I am incredibly grateful to Dr Pawel Kuklik, in particular, for providing support in computer programming to the groups, and for creating the software that was instrumental in the analysis for these studies. On this note, I cannot thank enough Mr Bruce Lobb for his major contribution to my animal study by creating the custom made microelectrode array – without both of their contributions, this thesis could not be completed. I would also like to thank Mr Christopher Wong, a medical student with a superb drive for collection and understanding of data.

My thanks also extend to the administrative staff, importantly, Melissa, Linda and Aimie. Melissa, a loyal and dedicated personal assistant to Professor Sanders, was instrumental in the management of clinical studies in the department, and the collection of data, dedicating

her time and efforts to duties to ensure we had access to clinical information necessary for keeping databases up to date.

Given the topic of this thesis, the input, guidance and assistance from the Royal Adelaide Hospital and Repatriation Hospital Department of Thoracic medicine, is gratefully acknowledged. I would like to specifically thank Drs Ral and Nick Antic, Dr Andrew Thornton and Professor Doug McEvoy for their expert tuition and guidance on the ins and outs of sleep apnoea. I cannot thank them enough for the abundant time and energy dedicated to scoring the seemingly hundreds of sleep studies performed. In particular, my thanks to sleep technologists Michelle Ng, Joel Pannell and Alison Fitch for dedicating their time to providing timely polysomnography reports.

The supervision of Dr David Saint was pivotal for the completion of the animal experiment, which is the basis of a major chapter of this thesis. I had essentially no prior experience in working with animals, and I could not have completed this component of my research without Dr Saint's expert advice and guidance. I appreciate the dedication and assistance of Melissa Neo and Julia Kim from Dr Saint's laboratory, in setting up my experiments, caring for the rabbits and helping me collect the data.

During the time of this thesis, my dearly loved mother passed away. It was my mother's dedication to my education that propelled me into university and my medical career. I am forever grateful for her support, encouragement, persistence and, most of all, love. Without her upbringing, I would not have made it to this privileged position. I must also thank my father for his wonderful kindness and patience with me,

especially through these difficult times. It was through the love and dedication of my parents that I was empowered to learn, achieve and ultimately succeed. God Bless you both.

Lastly, I cannot thank enough my wife Rhiannon. I am truly fortunate, and I have survived only with her everlasting and tireless support throughout this stressful time. Rhiannon's dedication and love of our son Marcus allowed me the necessary time to complete this work. Her kindness, patience, understanding and help I can never repay.

SCHOLARSHIPS DURING CANDIDATURE

2007

Postgraduate Scholarship from the Cardiac Society of Australia
and New Zealand scholarship

2008 & 2009

Medical Postgraduate Scholarship, jointly funded by the National
Heart Foundation of Australia, and, the National Health and
Medical Research Council of Australia

PUBLICATIONS AND COMMUNICATIONS TO LEARNED SOCIETIES

CHAPTER 2:

ORAL PRESENTATION: CARDIAC SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND SCIENTIFIC SESSIONS 2008

Hany Dimitri, Martin Stiles, John B, Lau DH, Shashidhar, Mackenzie L, Brooks A, Wilson L, Roberts-Thomson R, Wong C, Willoughby S, Young GD, Sanders P. Distribution of complex fragmented atrial electrograms in paroxysmal and permanent atrial fibrillation. Heart, Lung and Circ.; 16: S201.

CHAPTER 3:

ABSTRACT POSTER PRESENTATION: CARDIAC SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND SCIENTIFIC SESSIONS 2010

Hany Dimitri, Michelle Ng, Anthony Brooks, Andrew Thornton, Hany Abed, Muayad Alasady, Dennis Lau, Han Lim, Doug McEvoy, Ral Antic, Prashanthan Sanders. The severity of obstructive sleep apnoea determines the persistence and severity of atrial fibrillation. Heart, Lung and Circ.; 19: Supplement 2, S114

ABSTRACT POSTER PRESENTATION: HEART RHYTHM SOCIETY SCIENTIFIC SESSIONS 2010

Hany Dimitri, Michelle Ng, Mitra Shirazi, Darryl Leong, Andrew Thornton, , Anthony Brooks, Hany Abed, Muayad Alasady, Han Lim, Douglas McEvoy, Nicholas Antic, Ral Antic, and Prashanthan Sanders. Atrial fibrillation and obstructive sleep apnea: Severity of sleep apnea determines the persistence and symptoms of atrial fibrillation: Heart Rhythm 2010;7(5):S267-8

CHAPTER 4:

ORAL PRESENTATION: CARDIAC SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND SCIENTIFIC SESSIONS 2010

Hany Dimitri, Michelle Ng, Pawel Kuklik, Anthony Brooks, Martin Stiles, Andrew Thornton, Ral Antic, Prashanthan Sanders. Obstructive sleep apnoea and its implications for atrial remodeling in atrial fibrillation. Heart, Lung and Circ.; 19: Supplement 2; S109

ABSTRACT POSTER PRESENTATION: HEART RHYTHM SOCIETY SCIENTIFIC SESSIONS 2011

Hany Dimitri, Michelle Ng, Pawel Kuklik, Anthony Brooks, Martin Stiles, Andrew Thornton, Ral Antic, Prashanthan Sanders. Chronic obstructive sleep apnoea causes atrial remodeling: Implications for atrial fibrillation. Heart Rhythm 2011;8(5):S244

PUBLICATION:

Hany Dimitri, Michelle Ng, Anthony G. Brooks, Pawel Kuklik, Martin K. Stiles, Dennis H. Lau, Nicholas Antic, Andrew Thornton, David A. Saint, Doug McEvoy, Ral Antic, Jonathan M. Kalman, Prashanthan Sanders. Atrial remodeling in obstructive sleep apnea: Implications for atrial fibrillation . *Heart Rhythm*. 2011;9:321-327

EDITORIAL: Linz D, Neuberger HR. Obstructive sleep apnea: The suffocated atrium? *Heart Rhythm*. 2011;9:328-329

CHAPTER 5:**ABSTRACT POSTER PRESENTATION: CARDIAC SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND SCIENTIFIC SESSIONS 2010**

Hany Dimitri, Michelle Ng, Anthony Brooks, Nick Shipp, Nicholas Antic, Andrew Thornton, Ral Antic, Prashanthan Sanders. Obstructive events in sleep apnoea causes acute atrial remodeling in patients with atrial fibrillation. *Heart, Lung and Circ.*; 19: Supplement 2; S108-109

ABSTRACT POSTER PRESENTATION:**HEART RHYTHM SOCIETY SCIENTIFIC SESSIONS 2010**

Hany Dimitri, Michelle Ng, Anthony Brooks, Nicholas Shipp, Nick Antic, Douglas McEvoy, Andrew Thornton, Ral Antic, Prashanthan Sanders. Atrial remodeling as a consequence of acute clinical obstructive sleep apnea events: Implications for the development of atrial fibrillation. *Heart Rhythm* 2010;7(5):S385-6

CHAPTER 6:**ABSTRACT POSTER PRESENTATION: CARDIAC SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND SCIENTIFIC SESSIONS 2010**

Hany Dimitri, Pawel Kuklik, Nicholas Shipp, Anthony Brooks, Bruce Lobb, Lorraine Mackenzie, David Saint, Prashanthan Sanders. Atrial electrophysiology during hypoxia and hypercapnia: High Density multi-electrode array mapping and its implications for obstructive sleep apnea. *Heart, Lung and Circ.*; 19: Supplement 2, S85-86

ORAL PRESENTATION:**HEART RHYTHM SOCIETY SCIENTIFIC SESSIONS 2010**

Hany Dimitri, Melissa Neo, Nicholas Chia, Dennis Lau, , Anthony Brooks, Nicholas Shipp, Bruce Lobb, Pawel Kuklik, David Saint, and Prashanthan Sanders. High density multi-electrode array mapping of atrial tissue during hypoxia and hypercapnia: Implications for obstructive sleep apnea. *Heart Rhythm* 2010;7(5):S30

ABBREVIATIONS

AF	atrial fibrillation
AHI	apnoea hypopnoea index
CFAE	complex fractionated atrial electrograms
CPAP	continuous positive airway pressure
CSA	central sleep apnoea
CSNRT	corrected sinus node recovery time
ERP	effective refractory period
HR	hazard ratio
IQR	interquartile range
LA	left atrium
LV	left ventricle
OR	odds ratio
OSA	obstructive sleep apnoea
RA	right atrium
RDI	respiratory disturbance index
RR	relative risk
RV	right ventricle
SDB	sleep disordered breathing