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A new frontier in atherosclerotic coronary imaging

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Ischaemic heart disease resulting from rupture of atherosclerotic plaques is a major cause of death worldwide. Precisely why a plaque ruptures remains a mystery. However, in The Lancet, Nikhil Joshi and colleagues’ findings suggest that we are close to being able to detect when rupture is about to occur.

The simple and inexpensive $^{18}$F-sodium fluoride ($^{18}$F-NaF) PET radioisotope, used for 30 years to image bone formation, was found to signify metabolically active calcification in the aorta by Derlin and colleagues and in the coronary arteries by Beheshti, Anthony C, Hutchings A, Bateman DN, Routledge PA. Random and systematic medication errors in routine clinical practice: a multicentre study of infusions, using acetylcysteine as an example. Br J Clin Pharmacol 2001; 52: 573–77.


plaque rupture in atherosclerotic carotid tissue with high \(^{18}\)F-NaF activity, the authors can indeed state that of 40 patients with recent myocardial infarction (37 men, three women), plaque rupture can be detected non-invasively.

Now that we can detect plaque rupture, should we? Although the radioisotope \(^{18}\)F-NaF and PET-CT equipment are readily available in the developed world, much research needs to be done before the technique can become a viable clinical option. Just because a plaque at risk for rupture can be identified does not mean that we know what to do with this information. Prospective trials are needed to establish the frequency with which high \(^{18}\)F-NaF plaques rupture, and the timing of rupture. Also, does plaque rupture result in events or simply the rupture and healing cycle believed to result in a stepwise increase in plaque stenosis? If such trials are possible, what will we do with the information? Of Joshi and colleagues’ 40 patients with stable angina, nearly all were on antiplatelet agents and 36 were taking statins. Despite this therapy, 18 patients had at least one plaque with high \(^{18}\)F-NaF uptake. However, the ability to assess and potentially quantitatively measure plaque at high risk of rupture as a continuous variable (by maximum standard uptake value) creates a new world of opportunity for the investigation of pharmacological and device therapy.

The technique holds greater promise in populations with myocardial infarction and acute coronary syndrome than in more stable patients. Earlier work by Joshi and colleagues, for example, found a strong correlation between patients with high NaF plaques and those with the more easily and inexpensively obtained total Agatston coronary calcium score.¹⁴

The technique also creates the opportunity to better assess the commonly accepted belief that most myocardial infarctions are caused by rupture of previously non-obstructive plaques. The underpinnings of this theory are derived from coronary angiography that is done distant from the index myocardial infarction.⁶,⁷ Narula and colleagues⁸ and others have questioned this assumption. The predictive value for increasing non-fatal myocardial infarction and cardiac death consistently seen in studies of increasing ischaemia, as assessed by myocardial perfusion imaging,⁹ and worsening obstructive disease by coronary CT¹⁰ and invasive angiography, are also inconsistent with this assumption.

Questions to be answered include: how best to use information derived from an assessment of inflammation by \(^{18}\)F-FDG and active calcification by \(^{18}\)F-NaF. In large vessels without adjacent areas of intense \(^{18}\)F-FDG activity, \(^{18}\)F-FDG assessment is much less handicapped by overlapping structures compared with the coronary arteries. How do Joshi and colleagues’ findings apply to women, in whom plaque erosion is a much more common mechanism of myocardial infarction than in men? How do the findings apply to patients with diabetes? Does coronary artery bypass graft biology differ with respect to \(^{18}\)F-NaF activity? Do high \(^{18}\)F-NaF plaques in the carotid and other cerebrovascular vessels predict stroke and transient ischaemic attack? Joshi and colleagues and earlier pioneers have identified a new and hopefully fruitful frontier in nuclear cardiology and atherosclerotic coronary imaging.

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We declare that we have no conflicts of interest.