Introduction
Parasympathetic and sympathetic stimulation are known to cause AF, by macroreentry and microreentry (triggered
ectopics) respectively. It is important to recognize this, as missing the etiology might result in improper

Case Report
A 65 yrs old female came for grafting of post burn
contracture. Her medical history was conspicuous by the
absence of symptoms of thyrotoxicosis, pneumonia,
structural heart diseases, electrolyte imbalance etc which are
the known precipitants of AF. Preoperatively her pulse was
80/min and blood pressure was 140/90mm Hg. Preloading
was done with 1000 ml ringer's lactate. Subarachnoid
block was achieved with 3.5ml of injection bupivacaine
0.5% heavy, after 10 minutes a sensory anaesthesia level
achieved was T6. Her pulse was 75/min and B.P.120/80 mm
Hg.

After about 45 minutes, the cardioscope started showing
gradual decrease of heart rate and 15 minutes later, sudden
tachycardia of 140 bpm with replacement of “P” waves by
“f” waves was noted. Pulse was irregular. B.P.80/50 mm Hg.
Injection mephenetermine 6 mg was given intravenously.
Blood pressure rose to 90/60 mmHg. Injection metoprolol
5mg was given, but no change in pulse or B.P. was noted. 15
minutes later an injection of diltiazem 5 mg was given
intravenously. Heart rate fell to 110 bpm. B.P. rose to
106/70 mmHg. Though we were ready with a defibrillator,
the patient’s hemodynamic stability and lack of
unconsciousness rendered defibrillation unnecessary.

Discussion
Among the known factors precipitating atrial fibrillation,
vagal stimulation assumes a special importance, because it is
less commonly identified etiology. Since treatment of atrial
fibrillation due to other causes differs radically from vagal
mediated atrial fibrillation, conventional treatment may not
be effective or even be detrimental.1,2,3,4

Electrophysiological properties of ventricular and atrial
muscles are very different. Compared to ventricles atria have
lesser amplitude of phase 0, almost nonexistent phase 1, very
short phase 2. This correlates well with the shorter action
potential duration and mechanical systolic time of atria
compared to the ventricles (Graph 1).
Subarachnoid Block Associated Atrial Fibrillation

Figure 1
Graph 1: Electrophysiological differences between Action potentials of atrial (A) and ventricular (B) myocardia.

Note shorter action potential duration of atrial myocardium.

Influence of autonomic stimulation is also different between atria and ventricles. In the ventricles, because parasympathetic innervation is poor, vagal stimulation has almost insignificant change of either level of resting membrane potential (RMP) or action potential (AP) morphology. Whereas in the atria, vagal stimulation enhances Ach-gated K channels, hence reducing the duration of phase 2 further. Also the slope of phase 3 is increased. This hastens the attainment of RMP of -55mV. So the inactivated sodium channels are activated by opening of “h gate”, much earlier. This decreases effective refractory period (ERP). More importantly these effects are non uniform. Some fibers are affected more than others. Therefore temporal dispersion of inhomogeneties is strongly enhanced (Graph 2).

Figure 2
Graph 2: Fig A. The transmembrane potential changes of atrial musculature pre and post vagal stimulation (a and b respectively). Enhancement of Ach-gated K channels increases the slope of repolarisation, Fig B. Change in the slope of repolarisation resulting in reduced ERP, pre and post vagal stimulation (from c to d respectively).

This can be proved experimentally by eliciting AF by intravenous injection or topical application of acetylcholine. Acetylcholine increases the liability of the atria to respond with fibrillation to a single electrical stimulus which in absence of the drug would elicit only one extrasystole. Microelectrode studies show that acetylcholine shortens refractory period from 100ms to 10ms or less. Due to nonuniform affection, conduction velocities vary between the fibers. This contributes to inhomogeneity in refractoriness and spread of excitation and favour “functional fragmentation”.

Electrophysiological properties of SA node and AV node are different from the rest of the atria. The main differences are SA, AV nodes can function as pacemakers by triggering action potentials regularly and spontaneously. This is possible by the existence of “iF” current, “inward funny current” of sodium channel. The slope of Phase 0 is less steep, dominant ion responsible for the AP is calcium, not sodium as in atria. These differences are fundamentally due to less negative RMP of SA-AV nodes in contrast to the atria. Due to less negative RMP~50mV, “h gate” of voltage gated sodium channels are inactivated hence the dependence of AP on calcium channels, also the extreme sensitivity of SA and AV nodes to be blocked by the calcium channel blockers (Graph 3).
Subarachnoid Block Associated Atrial Fibrillation

Figure 3
Graph 3: Electrophysiological differences between atrial (A) and nodal cells (B).

Note the dependence of AP generation on $i_{Na}$ and $i_{Ca}$, not voltage gated $i_{Ko}$.

While treating the patient, heart rate control assumes paramount importance in case of hemodynamic instability. Decreasing the heart rate, improves ventricular filling and B.P. increases.

Digoxin and beta-blockers compound the problem by increasing the vagal tone further due to sympathetic blockade, are avoided. For rate control calcium channel blockers and for reversion of rhythm sodium and potassium channel blockers might be the preferable option.

In the end, we conclude that, understanding the electrophysiology of vagal mediated atrial fibrillation, rather than the protocol, helps the anaesthesiologist deliver better patient care.

References

Author Information

Chandan Shastri, M.B.B.S.
Junior Resident, Department of Anaesthesiology, K.E.M.Hospital, Seth G.S.Medical College

Rakesh Kapoor, M.B.B.S.
Junior resident, Department of Anaesthesiology, K.E.M.Hospital, Seth G.S.Medical College

Rutton N. Hilloowalla, M.D.
Lecturer, Department of Anaesthesiology, K.E.M.Hospital, Seth G.S.Medical College

B.A. Tendolkar, M.D.
Associate Professor, Department of Anaesthesiology, K.E.M.Hospital, Seth G.S.Medical College

L.S. Chaudhari, Professor and H.O.D.
Department of Anaesthesiology, K.E.M.Hospital, Seth G.S.Medical College