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Vasopressin, Sepsis, and Renal Perfusion—A VASST Deficit in Our Understanding*

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In this issue of *Critical Care Medicine*, Guarido et al (1) present their fascinating work in a model of endotoxemia in rats. Consistent with prior studies, they found that vasopressin could increase blood pressure in animals refractory to phenylephrine. What is provocative about this work is the presumptive mechanism for these findings. In septic animals, this improvement in blood pressure could not be explained by improvements in cardiac function or vasoconstriction from large vessels. The effect appeared to be a result of vasoconstriction within the renal vascular bed as evidenced by decreased renal blood flow (RBF) in vivo and increased renal vascular perfusion pressure in vitro. These effects were attenuated by Y-27632, implying that signaling via the Rho-A/Rho-kinase pathway plays a role. Presumably, this decrease in renal perfusion could potentially result in acute kidney injury (AKI), a syndrome that has been associated with increased mortality in the ICU setting (2). The implication is that in the setting of refractory shock, similar physiology may apply to patients resulting in an increase in AKI with vasopressin.

The current Surviving Sepsis Campaign Guidelines (3), based largely on the results of the VASST trial (4), recommend

vasopressin in the setting of refractory shock to either increase mean arterial pressure or decrease the dose of other vasopressors but does not recommend it as a first-line agent. In this study, renal dysfunction was not significantly different between the two groups. However, AKI was defined by the Brussels criteria and not the now commonly used definitions based on relative changes in creatinine and changes in urine output (5–7). A post hoc analysis of the VASST trial (8) using creatinine-based Risk, Injury, Failure, Loss, End-stage renal disease (RIFLE) criteria (5) demonstrated that in patients with RIFLE category 'Risk', vasopressin was associated with a decrease in mortality, decrease in progression to RIFLE 'Injury' and 'Failure', decrease in creatinine, and decrease in the need for renal replacement therapy. Furthermore, other work has found an improvement in urine output (9, 10) and creatinine clearance (10, 11) with vasopressin therapy.

How can these findings be reconciled with the present study? It may simply be the innate differences in humans versus other animals. Alternatively, the degree to which this applies to humans may be smaller, resulting in an insignificant clinical difference. A more intriguing hypothesis, however, is that the findings of Guarido et al (1) do apply to patients. Although RBF and glomerular filtration rate (GFR) are certainly correlated, they are not necessarily the same thing with the later involving a complicated interplay of intrarenal hemodynamics. This is a key insight for interpreting the work by Guarido et al (1). As implied by this study's contrasting findings in control and lipopolysaccharide animals, different disease states may fundamentally change the renal hemodynamic response to vasopressin. Constriction of larger arteries and/or the afferent arteriole would be expected to decrease both RBF and GFR, whereas, conceivably, constriction of the efferent arteriole could decrease RBF and augment GFR. Furthermore, a decrease in medullary blood flow in the setting of preserved cortical blood flow would be expected to decrease RBF and leave GFR relatively unchanged but could result in tubular injury. The literature on the effect of vasopressin on intrarenal hemodynamics is conflicting (12–15). These studies examined different animal models and different diseased and normal states. One explanation for these disparate results is that vasopressin rather than having a static role has subtle, but significant, differences depending on the physiologic setting.

Notably, the VASST trial did not examine a cohort of patients that could be considered a corollary to the refractory shock model reported by Guarido et al (1). Given that the mean arterial blood pressures in both arms at baseline of the VASST trial were approximately 70 mm Hg, vasopressin was examined as a "catecholamine-sparing drug," not necessarily as a therapy for refractory shock. It is possible that vasopressin deleteriously alters renal hemodynamics only in the setting of catecholamine unresponsiveness. This might also help explain the underlying paradox that patients with less severe shock

*See also p. e461.

Key Words: acute kidney injury; renal blood flow; sepsis; shock; vasopressin

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(defined by a norepinephrine dose of 15 µg/min or less) had an improved survival with vasopressin in the VASST trial. This hypothesis implies that hemodynamic support for patients in shock may need to be individualized based on severity and etiology. Further human studies will be needed to understand whether the physiology and the Rho-A/Rho-kinase pathway are the same for human beings. Large, prospective human trials are then needed to determine the optimal therapies for patients in various states of shock before clinicians change their practice patterns. Further understanding of renal hemodynamics, and how they differ between disease states, will be vital for guiding future translational research to optimize vasopressin use. Works such as Guarido et al (1) will be vital in the design of these future trials.

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