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Heart 2010 96: 995-996
doi: 10.1136/hrt.2010.196048

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FEATURED CORRESPONSE

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To the Editor: We read with interest the article by Murphy et al on the importance of ST elevation on the exercise ECG.1 In this article, the authors suggest that severe coronary artery stenosis was an almost exclusive cause for ST elevation during exercise in a white population. Just a few days after I read this article, a patient came to my office who was referred for coronary angiography as a result of ST elevation on exercise electrocardiography (ECG). The patient was a 42-year-old man who had experienced resting chest pain 2 days ago. He presented at an emergency clinic. After obtaining negative results for cardiac markers, he had undergone exercise ECG. During the second stage of the Bruce protocol, exercise ECG showed up to 5 mm of ST elevation at leads V1–V5 together with chest pain (figure 1). Keeping the article of Murphy et al in mind, I planned urgent coronary angiography. During angiography, the first injections in the left coronary artery revealed a severe stenosis at the proximal left anterior descending coronary artery (figure 2). However, also keeping in mind that ST elevation during exercise might be related to coronary spasm, I administered intracoronary nitroglycerin and realised that the stenosis was a coronary spasm (figure 3).

We admire the work of Murphy et al, but we have some concerns regarding the interpretation of the data, probably as a result of well-known limitations of retrospective study design. There are several reports indicating that coronary vasospasm may mimic obstructive coronary artery disease and unnecessary coronary interventions; even coronary bypass surgery may be performed in case there is lack of suspicion of coronary spasm.2

Therefore, in our view, there is a possibility of unrevealed coronary spasm in this large group of patients presented by Murphy et al if routine intracoronary nitroglycerin administration was not performed. We believe that clinicians should be more suspicious about coronary spasm if there is transient ST elevation in the history of the patient, and routine use of intracoronary nitroglycerin may be helpful in identifying these patients. In addition, to clarify the meaning of ST elevation on exercise ECG, a prospective angiographic study evaluating the role of coronary spasm is needed.

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Competing interests None.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

Heart 2010;96:995. doi:10.1136/hrt.2009.191338

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The Authors’ reply: We thank Norgaz et al for their comments on our article1 and their demonstration of coronary spasm during cardiac catheterisation in a male patient who had ST-segment elevation (STE) during exercise stress testing.2 Their report does not suggest the possibility that the spasm was induced by catheter instrumentation or whether the phenomenon reproduced symptoms of chest pain and STE on the electrocardiogram (ECG) at coronary angiography. Furthermore, the exercise ECG demonstrates STE in leads V1—V3 and leads aVR and aVL with pathological Q waves present in the anteroseptal leads. This indicates the probability of a previous anteroseptal infarction. Our patients did not have a prior history of myocardial infarction or significant Q waves on their ECG.

We indicated1 that coronary artery spasm can cause exercise-induced STE and has been well described in the literature.3,4 This can occur in both atheromatously diseased vessels and coronary arteries that otherwise appear normal. We concluded that all patients with
STE on exercise stress testing should undergo diagnostic angiography, and the present case demonstrates again the necessity of invasive assessment in determining the aetiology of exercise-induced STE.

Worldwide differences in aetiology of exercise-induced STE have been noted. We referred to studies from Asia where coronary spasm has a significant incidence. We are not aware of any studies from other parts of the world where this phenomenon has been studied extensively. The letter from Norgaz et al again underlines that there is likely to be regional variations in the aetiology of exercise-induced STE.

Norgaz et al express concerns that some patients in our study may have had significant coronary spasm and an incorrect diagnosis of severe coronary artery disease. None of our patients had chest pain or STE at coronary angiography. All patients undergoing percutaneous coronary intervention received intracoronary nitroglycerine during the procedure.

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Competing interests None.

Provenance and peer review Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.