E SH Statement

ESH Position Paper: Renal denervation – an interventional therapy of resistant hypertension

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Experts from the European Society of Hypertension prepared this position paper in order to summarize current evidence, unmet needs and practical recommendations on the application of percutaneous transluminal ablation of renal nerves [renal denervation (RDN)] as a novel therapeutic strategy for the treatment of resistant hypertension. The sympathetic nervous activation to the kidney and the sensory afferent signals to the central nervous system represent the targets of RDN. Clinical studies have documented that catheter-based RDN decreases both efferent sympathetic and afferent sensory nerve traffic leading to clinically meaningful systolic and diastolic blood pressure (BP) reductions in patients with resistant hypertension. This position statement intends to facilitate a better understanding of the effectiveness, safety, limitations and issues still to be addressed with RDN.

Keywords: European Society of Hypertension, interventional therapy, resistant hypertension

Abbreviations: BP, blood pressure; RDN, renal denervation

THE GLOBAL BURDEN OF UNCONTROLLED HYPERTENSION

A rterial hypertension affects nowadays approximately 25% of the global adult population and its prevalence and consequent health cost is predicted to rise to 1.5 billion hypertensive patients in 2025 [1]. There is a linear relationship between blood pressure (BP) values and cardiovascular risk [2,3] and according to a worldwide analysis 7.6 million premature deaths (about 13.5% of total deaths), 54% of strokes and 47% of events due to ischemic heart disease are attributed to high BP [4]. Most importantly even modest BP reduction is accompanied by significant attenuation of the overall cardiovascular morbidity and mortality, irrespective of the starting BP level [5–8]. Despite appropriate antihypertensive treatment BP goals are not achieved in a large proportion of patients, the so-called resistant hypertensive patients.

According to the European Society of Hypertension (ESH)/European Society of Cardiology (ESC) and Seventh report of the Joint National Committee on Prevention, Detection, Evaluation and Treatment of High Blood Pressure (JNC 7) guidelines, resistant hypertension is defined as persistence of BP levels above goal in spite of the concurrent use of three antihypertensive agents in adequate doses from different classes including a diuretic [5,6]. The exact prevalence of resistant hypertension is difficult to determine but depending on the population and the hypertension center considered it ranges from 5 to 30% [9–12]. Failure to reach BP goals despite therapeutic interventions accelerates target organ damage and sets patients at high risk for major cardiovascular events [5,6,13].

Along these lines, developing additional approaches to the current management of resistant hypertension consisting of lifestyle modification combined with poly-pharmaco-therapy is a clinical priority. Percutaneous catheter-based transluminal renal ablation [from now on referred to as renal denervation (RDN)] by delivery of radiofrequency energy is emerging as a new approach to achieve sustained BP reduction in patients with resistant hypertension [14–17]. Within the past year, the innovative method of RDN has progressively entered clinical practice in many countries, for the treatment of resistant hypertensive patients. The potential for its clinical use is based on the role of sympathetic overactivity in the maintenance of high BP values.

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OVERALL AND RENAL SYMPATHETIC OVERACTIVITY IN HYPERTENSION

Increased sympathetic activity has been shown to characterize all hypertensive phenotypes including essential hypertension [18–20], white-coat and masked hypertension [18,21], associated with either dipping, extreme dipping, nondipping, or reverse dipping conditions [22]. This is also the case for pregnancy-induced hypertension [23], some secondary types of hypertension [24] and resistant hypertension [25]. Most notably, sympathetic nervous system overactivity involves the kidney [26] and increases progressively and in parallel with hypertension severity stages [25,27,28].

The sympathetic innervation of the kidneys is achieved through a dense network of postganglionic neurons that innervate the kidney [29,30]. The axons of preganglionic neurons exit the thoracic and lumbar sympathetic trunk and reach the pre and paravertebral sympathetic ganglia. Renal postganglionic nerves run alongside the renal artery and enter the hilus of the kidney. Thereafter, they divide into smaller nerve bundles following the blood vessels and penetrate the cortical and juxtamedullary areas. Renal sympathetic nerve activation enhances noradrenaline production and release from nerve endings, leading to renal vasoconstriction, enhanced renin secretion, increased sodium and fluid reabsorption, renal vasoconstriction, and decrease in renal blood flow and glomerular filtration rate [31].

The cell bodies of renal afferent nerves are located in the ipsilateral dorsal root ganglia (T6-L4). From there, ascending signals travel to the cardiovascular centers in the central nervous system. Renal afferent sensory nerves respond to stretch (mechanoreceptors), renal ischemia, hypoxia or other injury (chemoreceptors) by increasing renal afferent activity [32–34]. Electrical stimulation of afferent renal nerves increases BP [35] and induces mesenteric and muscle vasoconstriction [35]. Conversely, afferent renal denervation attenuates these effects and delays or prevents hypertension in several animal models [36]. Overall afferent and efferent fibers deliver an important contribution to regulation of systemic vascular resistance and BP control [37].

RENEWAL DENERVATION IN RESISTANT HYPERTENSION

In the past century, surgical splanchnicectomy that led to renal denervation among others improved survival of hypertensive patients when compared to conservative management available at that time [38], but the interest in this invasive surgical technique faded quite suddenly with the dawn of effective antihypertensive drug therapy.

Renal denervation is a percutaneous procedure, minimally invasive, characterized by short recovery times, and absence of significant systematic side effects. Evidence on the clinical effectiveness of this procedure in hypertensive patients comes from the Symplicity Clinical Trial Program consisting of a group of studies focusing on the effects of RDN in the treatment of resistant hypertension. These trials include the Symplicity Hypertension (HTN)-1 (with extended follow-up) and the Symplicity HTN-2 study, both already published [15–17].

Symplicity HTN-1 study and extended follow-up

Efficacy

This first-in-man proof-of-concept and safety study included 50 patients (mean age 58 ± 9 years) with severe resistant hypertension (office SBP ≥160 mmHg with at least three or more antihypertensive medications, including a diuretic). Baseline office SBP/DBP values were 177/101 mmHg with 5.1 antihypertensive drugs on average. RDN was achieved using a radiofrequency ablation catheter inserted through the femoral artery (Symplicity, Ardian Inc., Palo Alto, California, USA). Office SBP/DBP values after bilateral RDN were reduced by −14/−10, −21/−10, −22/−11, −24/−11, and −27/−17 mmHg at 1, 3, 6, 9, and 12 months, respectively. In nine patients medication was increased and in four patients decreased. After censoring data a similar effect in office SBP/DBP was observed. In a small subset of patients renal noradrenaline spillover was found to be reduced by 47% thereby demonstrating the effectiveness of sympathetic renal fibers ablation. Over a longer-term follow-up of 153 patients, including 45 patients treated with RDN in the frame of Symplicity HTN-1 Study and a larger group of similar patients treated with catheter-based RDN in a nonrandomized manner (mean age 57 years, mean office SBP/DBP 176/98 mm Hg in spite of an average of 5.1 antihypertension drugs), office SBP/DBP values were significantly reduced by 20/10, 24/11, 25/11, 23/11, 26/14, and 32/14 mmHg at 1, 3, 6, 12, 18, and 24 months, respectively. These findings suggest that reduction of BP is sustained at least up to 2 years after the procedure.

Safety

The long-term safety of catheter-based RND was investigated in the extended Symplicity HTN-1 cohort (n = 153) in which 97% of patients (149 of 153) had no complications. The four acute procedural complications included three groin pseudoaneurysms and one renal artery dissection, all managed without further sequelae. In one patient, computed tomography (CT) angiography performed 6 months after the procedure revealed progression of an existing stenosis at the ostium of one renal artery that was successfully treated with stenting. However, the site of the stenosis was not in the area of energy delivery during RDN. Focusing on renal function, during the first year of follow-up, estimated glomerular filtration rate remained stable, and after the 2 years there were no cases of doubling of serum creatinine or of chronic kidney disease stage 4 or 5 development.

Symplicity HTN-2

Efficacy

This multicenter, prospective, randomized clinical trial included patients with resistant hypertension and office SBP at least 160 mmHg (or ≥150 mmHg for patients with
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Regarding efficacy, there was no sham control group in the available trials, which is now part of Symplicity HTN-3 currently conducted in the US as well as in the Duration of Renal Sympathetic Activation and Hypertension study starting in Europe and Canada. Ambulatory blood pressure monitoring was available in a small (selected) portion of patients only and the observed degree of reduction was smaller compared to office and home BP [15,17]. Thus, the true antihypertensive effect of RDN, and particularly that on the prognostically important out of office BP, still needs to be determined. The long-term duration of the antihypertensive effect after RDN needs to be investigated since renal nerve fibers may regenerate [40,41]. It has to be emphasized that in the extended Symplicity HTN-1 trial there was no attenuation of the BP decrease throughout the follow-up period of 24 months suggesting that functional reinnervation did not take place over the time window considered [16]. Up to now, patients with dual renal arteries and accessory arteries have been excluded and there are no systematic data on unilateral RDN effects [15,17].

The lack of any preprocedural marker that might identify good responders to RDN (except the baseline BP) is another matter to be addressed. Despite the methodological achievements in the assessment of adrenergic function (as obtained by performing microneurography and organ specific noradrenaline spillover), no clinically applicable technique is available to indicate successful renal sympathetic fibers ablation during the procedure. So far RDN is performed in patients with severe resistant hypertension and its effect in less severe forms of hypertension is unknown. Likewise it is also unknown whether cardiovascular endpoints are prevented and mortality reduced.

Nowadays there are further experimental studies with promising results on renal sympathetic denervation performed with different techniques, using local delivery of neurotoxic drugs, cryoablation, ultrasound-induced denervation, and there are ongoing clinical trials with radiofrequency catheter using other catheter types [e.g. trials with a basket-type ablation catheter (Ablation Induced Renal Sympathetic Denervation Trial study)] [42].

The above unmet needs are summarized in Box 1.

### ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA FOR RENAL DENERVATION

Based on current evidence from available clinical studies hypertensive patients are eligible for RDN if they have (severe) treatment-resistant hypertension defined by office SBP at least 160 systolic (≥150 mmHg in type 2 diabetes)

### LIMITATION AND OPEN QUESTIONS

Until the beginning of 2012 only a small number of patients have been exposed to RDN, and the follow-up is rather short. Thus, several issues needs to be further elucidated.

**Box 1 Unmet needs in RDN**

- Randomized blinded studies
- Use of 24-h ABPM to enroll patients and to assess BP reduction
- Comparison of RDN efficacy and safety when using different procedures
- Long-term maintenance of efficacy and safety
- Impact in morbidity and mortality reduction
- Cost-benefit balance studies
- Standardized certification of RDN centers
Despite treatment with at least three antihypertensive drugs of different types in adequate doses, including one diuretic, which is equivalent to stage 2 or 3 hypertension [15–17].

Patients should have been evaluated by a hypertension specialist in very experienced hospital centers (e.g. ESH excellence centers). Patients should undergo a through clinical examination to confirm treatment resistance and exclude pseudoresistance as the initial steps. Attention is needed regarding nonadherence to drug therapy that is often present and not acknowledged if not rigorously investigated [6]. Persisting high office BP in spite of drug treatment should be confirmed with home and most importantly with 24-h ambulatory blood pressure monitoring, since up to one-third of treatment-resistant hypertension patients have normal BP outside the office (false resistant hypertension due to persisting white-coat effect during treatment) [43]. After confirming a ‘true’ resistant hypertension, careful attempts should be made to identify and reverse contributing lifestyle factors, to discontinue or minimize use of BP rising substances along with an additional screening for secondary causes of hypertension, to identify those conditions when BP control could be easier with removal of the responsible factors [5,6]. Controversy exists whether use of aldosterone antagonists is a prerequisite for eligibility. SBP reduction up to 25 mmHg systolic has been reported but not all patients have such a response. In the first double-blind randomized trial, the fall in BP with spironolactone was rather modest and long-term safety is a matter of concern [44]. If hypertension is not controlled then the patient is considered a candidate for RDN.

If not already done, it is recommended to obtain renal artery imaging (e.g. CT or magnetic resonance (MR) angiography) to assess accurately renal artery anatomy before performing RDN.

It has to be emphasized that patients with treatment-resistant hypertension have almost invariably been exposed to a variety of antihypertensive medications. A large proportion of them claims intolerance to some antihypertensive drugs, and such an intolerance may be related to the typical side effects attributable to a given compound but it may also be related to a patient’s psychiatric problem or unsuccessful physician/patient relationship. This represents a challenge for the hypertension specialist whose task is to diagnose true drug intolerance (e.g. by re-exposition of the intolerant drug), because only in this case a procedure of RDN may be justified.

The following exclusion criteria should also be implemented in order to safely proceed to RDN: [15–17] previous renal artery intervention (balloon angioplasty or stenting), evidence of renal artery atherosclerosis (defined as a renal artery stenosis >50%), presence of multiple main renal arteries in either kidneys or main renal arteries of less than 4 mm in diameter or less than 20 mm in length and estimated glomerular filtration rate <45 ml/min per 1.73 m². Patients should be in stable clinical conditions (RDN is not an emergency treatment), thus ruling out patients with recent myocardial infarction, unstable angina pectoris, or a cerebrovascular accident within the past 3–6 months.

If the patient fulfills all the eligibility criteria for RDN the procedure is consequently scheduled. The intervention should be performed by interventional cardiologists or radiologists who have been trained with this specific intervention and who are qualified to manage potential complications, such as dissection of renal artery.

Practical recommendations for RND in clinical practice are shown in Box 2.

**Box 2** Today recommendations

- First step: Exclude
  - False resistant hypertension (pseudoresistance) by using 24h ambulatory blood pressure monitoring (ABPM) and home BP monitoring.
  - Secondary arterial hypertension
  - Causes which maintain high BP values and might be removed (obstructive sleep-apnea, high salt intake, BP rising drugs, severe obesity)
- Second step: Optimize antihypertensive treatment with at least three (or better four) tolerated drugs including a diuretic and an antialdosterone drug (if clinically possible, e.g. after re-evaluating renal function and the potential risk of hyperkalaemia) and check for effective BP control using ABPM before giving indication for RND
- Third step: Consider anatomic contraindications due to unresolved safety issues (avoid RDN in case of multiple renal arteries, main renal artery diameter of less than 4 mm or main renal artery length less than 20 mm, significant renal artery stenosis, previous angioplasty or stenting of renal artery). Likewise, eGFR should be >45 ml/min/1.73 m²
- Overall:
  - Perform the procedure in very experienced hospital centers, such as hypertension excellence centers
  - Use devices which have demonstrate efficacy and safety in clinical studies

**REFERENCES**

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