

## CARDIOVASCULAR MEDICINE

# Heart-type fatty acid binding protein is a novel prognostic marker in patients with non-ischaemic dilated cardiomyopathy

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Heart 2006;92:615–618. doi: 10.1136/hrt.2004.043067

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Accepted  
15 December 2005  
Published Online First  
30 December 2005

**Objective:** To determine whether concentrations of heart-type fatty acid binding protein (H-FABP) measured before hospital discharge predict critical cardiac events in patients with idiopathic dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM).

**Patients:** 92 consecutive patients with DCM were enrolled and followed up for four years.

**Main outcome measures:** Serum concentrations of H-FABP, brain natriuretic peptide (BNP), cardiac troponin T before hospital discharge and survival rate.

**Results:** 23 patients died of cardiac causes, received a left ventricular assist device or underwent heart transplantation during the four-year follow up. Univariate analyses showed that New York Heart Association functional class, heart rate, ejection fraction, serum H-FABP and plasma BNP were significant variables. According to multivariate analysis, serum H-FABP and plasma BNP concentrations were independent predictors of critical cardiac events. Cardiac troponin T before hospital discharge was not a predictor. The area under the receiver operating characteristic curve for death from critical cardiac events was similar between H-FABP and BNP. Patients with an H-FABP concentration at or above the median ( $\geq 5.4$  ng/ml) had a significantly lower survival rate than those below the median, according to analysis by log rank test ( $p < 0.0001$ ). When combined with BNP concentration at or above the median ( $\geq 138$  pg/ml), H-FABP below the median predicted the worst prognosis among the combinations.

**Conclusions:** The concentration of serum H-FABP before discharge from hospital may be an independent predictor for critical cardiac events in DCM.

Idiopathic non-ischaemic dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM) has wide range of phenotypes and variable clinical outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Identification of patients with DCM at higher risk for adverse outcomes in its earlier stage may optimise the use of limited health care resources. Brain natriuretic peptide (BNP) is now widely recognised as the most powerful prognostic marker for heart failure,<sup>2</sup> and BNP-guided tailored treatment<sup>3</sup> is advocated. Raised BNP in heart failure is mainly attributable to its gene expression in stretched cardiomyocytes undergoing raised ventricular pressure.<sup>4</sup> The regulation of BNP secretion, however, is complex. BNP is also raised in patients with cardiac hypertrophy,<sup>5</sup> renal failure<sup>6</sup> or acute coronary syndrome.<sup>7</sup>  $\beta$  blocker directly enhances expression and release of BNP from cardiomyocytes.<sup>8</sup>

Fatty acid binding protein is extremely abundant in cytoplasm, has low molecular weight and is considered to be one of the key fatty acid carrier proteins.<sup>9</sup> Thus, fatty acid binding proteins are rapidly released into the circulation shortly after cell damage. Heart-type fatty acid binding protein (H-FABP) is immunologically specific to cardiomyocytes and is used as an early diagnostic marker for acute myocardial infarction.<sup>10</sup> In the present study, we tested whether the concentrations of H-FABP measured before discharge predict critical cardiac events for patients with DCM.

## METHODS

Of 97 consecutive patients with DCM admitted to our institute for diagnosis or treatment between January 1997 and December 2000, five patients were excluded from this

study because of renal dysfunction (serum creatinine concentration  $\geq 177$   $\mu\text{mol/l}$ ). The remaining 92 patients (66 men and 26 women; mean age 49 years, range 16–76 years) were enrolled in the study. The study procedures were in accordance with the guidelines of our institute, and informed consent was obtained from each patient. The diagnosis of DCM was based on the definition of the World Health Organization/International Society and Federation of Cardiology Task Force.<sup>11</sup> No patient had a history of myocardial infarction, infective myocarditis, metabolic disease or systemic illness. All patients underwent coronary angiography and endomyocardial biopsy for differential diagnosis of DCM. No significant coronary stenosis was found in any patient. Myocarditis was excluded on the basis of the Dallas criteria<sup>12</sup> as well as the method of Edwards *et al*.<sup>13</sup> and Katsuragi *et al*.<sup>14</sup> Immunohistochemical analysis with CD45RO was conducted to clarify T lymphocyte infiltration. In a quiescent condition with optimal medical treatment, patients underwent electrocardiography, echocardiography and blood sampling for standard laboratory chemical analysis, myocardial markers and complete blood count just before discharge from hospital. Myocardial markers measured in the present study were as follows: plasma BNP (Shionogi Co, Osaka, Japan), serum H-FABP (MARKIT-M, Dainippon Pharmaceutical Company, Osaka, Japan) and cardiac troponin T (cTnT) (Boehringer Mannheim,

**Abbreviations:** BNP, brain natriuretic peptide; cTnT, cardiac troponin T; DCM, dilated cardiomyopathy; H-FABP, heart-type fatty acid binding protein

Mannheim, Germany). The analytical range, intra-assay and interassay coefficients of variation, and normal reference range of the assays were 4.0–4000 pg/ml, 4.94% and 2.22%, and < 18.4 pg/ml, respectively, for BNP; 1.25–250 ng/ml, 5.8% and 1.7%, and < 5.25 ng/ml for H-FABP; and 0.01–25 ng/ml, 1.1% and 1.5%, and < 0.01 ng/ml for cTnT.

Results are presented as mean (SD) for continuous variables. Data were statistically analysed with JMP statistical software (JMP version 5.1, SAS Institute). Differences between groups were estimated by the unpaired t test or Mann–Whitney U test, as appropriate for continuous variables, and by Fisher's exact test or  $\chi^2$  test, as appropriate for categorical variables. The risk ratio with the 95% confidence interval for progression to cardiac death, left ventricular assist device or heart transplantation was estimated by univariate and multivariate Cox proportional hazards models. Variables that were significant in univariate analyses were entered into the multivariate analysis. Biochemical values such as BNP and H-FABP were log transformed (ln) to remove skewness of data distribution. Survival curves were constructed by the Kaplan–Meier method and compared by the log rank test. Receiver operating characteristic curves were generated from multiple sensitivity–specificity pairs. A value of  $p < 0.05$  was considered significant.

## RESULTS

### Patient characteristics

During 48 months of follow up, 23 patients had critical cardiac events. Thirteen patients died of left ventricular failure, three patients received a left ventricular assist device and were added to the waiting list for transplantation, and seven patients received a heart transplant. Table 1 compares the characteristics of patients who had critical cardiac events

**Table 1** Patients' characteristics

| Variable                             | Non-survivors (n=23) | Survivors (n=69)   | p Value |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------|---------|
| Age (years)                          | 50 (13)              | 49 (11)            | 0.5519  |
| Men/women                            | 16/7<br>(70%/30%)    | 50/19<br>(72%/28%) | 0.7892  |
| NYHA functional class                |                      |                    | 0.0132  |
| I                                    | 1 (4%)               | 21 (30%)           |         |
| II                                   | 8 (35%)              | 26 (38%)           |         |
| III                                  | 14 (61%)             | 22 (32%)           |         |
| IV                                   | 0                    | 0                  |         |
| Atrial fibrillation                  | 4 (17%)              | 10 (14%)           | 0.7375  |
| Duration of CHF (years)              | 3.6 (2.7)            | 4.0 (2.4)          | 0.4979  |
| Body mass index (kg/m <sup>2</sup> ) | 21 (3)               | 22 (3)             | 0.2342  |
| Heart rate (beats/min)               | 81 (13)              | 73 (12)            | 0.0176  |
| Mean arterial BP (mm Hg)             | 81 (10)              | 82 (11)            | 0.7447  |
| LVEF (%)                             | 30 (8)               | 37 (9)             | 0.0020  |
| LVEDD (mm)                           | 61 (9)               | 60 (10)            | 0.4521  |
| QTc (ms)                             | 419 (26)             | 411 (25)           | 0.1780  |
| Packed cell volume                   | 0.38 (0.02)          | 0.38 (0.02)        | 0.8495  |
| Sodium (mmol/l)                      | 136 (3)              | 137 (3)            | 0.5980  |
| Creatinine ( $\mu$ mol/l)            | 97 (35)              | 88 (35)            | 0.8523  |
| Uric acid ( $\mu$ mol/l)             | 488 (184)            | 428 (143)          | 0.1816  |
| CK-MB (ng/ml)                        | 5.4 (2.2)            | 4.7 (2.0)          | 0.2389  |
| cTnT (ng/ml)                         | 0.02 (0.01)          | 0.02 (0.01)        | 0.1155  |
| BNP (pg/ml)                          | 267 (141)            | 108 (81)           | <0.0001 |
| H-FABP (ng/ml)                       | 9.3 (3.5)            | 5.1 (2.6)          | <0.0001 |
| Drugs                                |                      |                    |         |
| Oral inotropics                      | 3 (13%)              | 6 (9%)             | 0.5433  |
| Digitalis                            | 13 (57%)             | 30 (43%)           | 0.2776  |
| Nitrates                             | 3 (13%)              | 12 (17%)           | 0.6250  |
| Diuretics                            | 22 (96%)             | 68 (99%)           | 0.4091  |
| ACE inhibitors                       | 16 (70%)             | 55 (80%)           | 0.3154  |
| $\beta$ blockers                     | 18 (78%)             | 52 (75%)           | 0.7778  |

ACE, angiotensin converting enzyme; BNP, brain natriuretic peptide; BP, blood pressure; CHF, congestive heart failure; CK, creatine kinase; cTnT, cardiac troponin T; H-FABP, heart-type fatty acid binding protein; LVEDD, left ventricular end diastolic diameter; LVEF, left ventricular ejection fraction; NYHA, New York Heart Association.

**Table 2** Multivariate proportional hazards analysis

| Variable           | RR    | 95% CI         | p Value |
|--------------------|-------|----------------|---------|
| NYHA class II v I  | 1.971 | 0.421 to 5.825 | 0.3190  |
| NYHA class III v I | 3.051 | 0.636 to 9.736 | 0.1344  |
| Heart rate         | 1.025 | 0.978 to 1.076 | 0.3022  |
| LVEF               | 0.957 | 0.898 to 1.017 | 0.1601  |
| BNP(ln)            | 10.87 | 3.527 to 35.32 | <0.0001 |
| H-FABP(ln)         | 7.450 | 1.722 to 36.12 | 0.0068  |

BNP, brain natriuretic peptide; CI, confidence interval; H-FABP, heart-type fatty acid binding protein; LVEF, left ventricular ejection fraction; NYHA, New York Heart Association; RR, risk ratio.

(non-survivors) and the remaining patients (survivors). New York Heart Association functional class, heart rate, BNP and H-FABP concentrations before hospital discharge were significantly higher among non-survivors than among survivors. Left ventricular ejection fraction was significantly lower in non-survivors than in survivors. The two groups did not differ significantly in other variables including drug treatment at discharge.

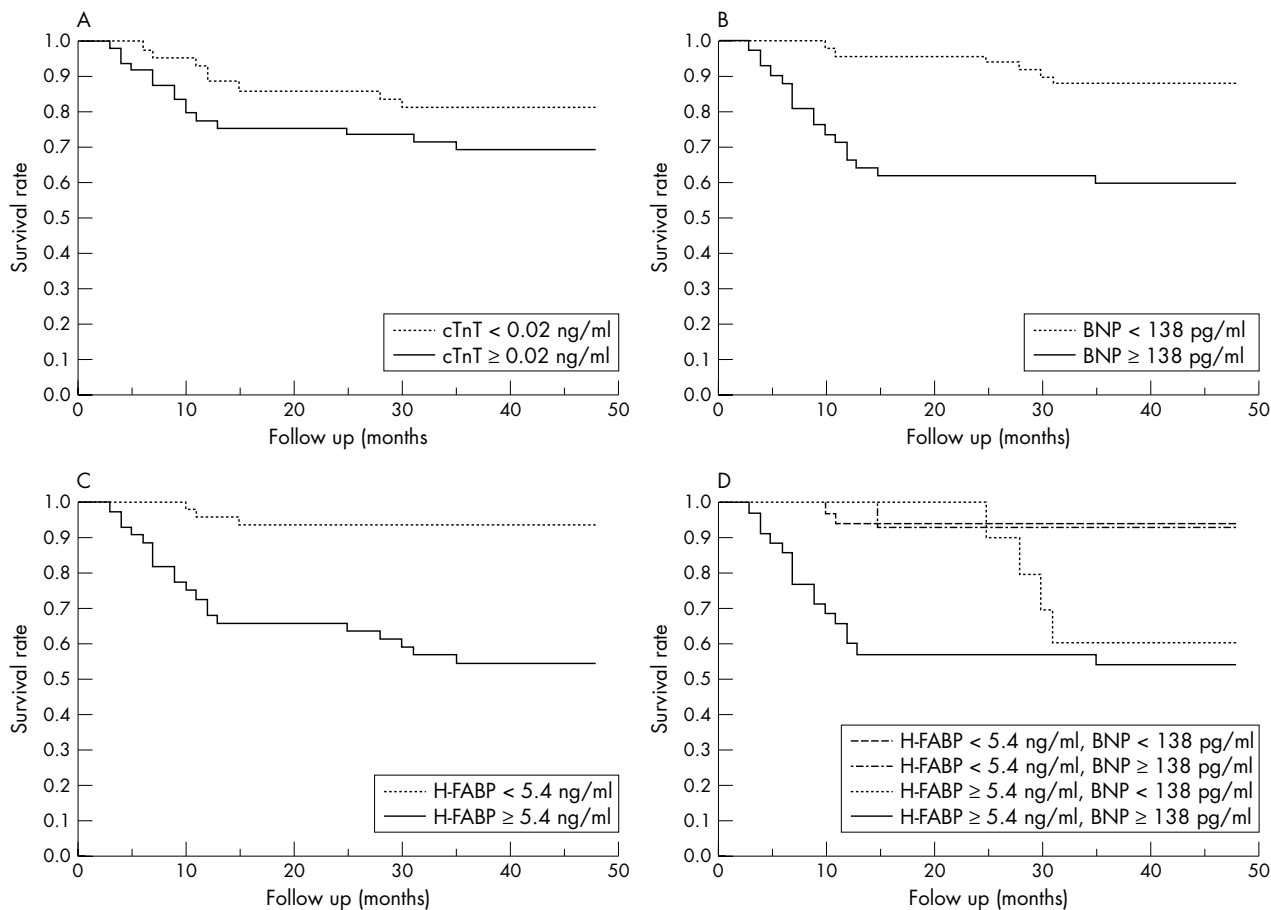
### Event analyses

By univariate analyses, functional class ( $p = 0.0035$ ), heart rate ( $p = 0.0021$ ) and left ventricular ejection fraction ( $p = 0.0018$ ) were related to critical cardiac events in DCM. Concentrations of H-FABP(ln) ( $p < 0.0001$ ) and BNP(ln) ( $p < 0.0001$ ) before discharge were also associated with critical cardiac events in DCM. Among five significant variables in univariate analysis, H-FABP(ln) and BNP(ln) concentrations were the sole independent predictors of critical cardiac events in patients with DCM (table 2). Repeating the analysis with these two independent variables showed that H-FABP(ln) ( $p = 0.0068$ ) and BNP(ln) ( $p = 0.0001$ ) had significant effects on critical cardiac events. Risk ratios of H-FABP(ln) and BNP(ln) were 7.450 and 10.87, respectively, in this reanalysis. Thus, patients had a 10.9 times higher risk of events with each increase of BNP(ln) by one unit. Likewise, patients had a 7.5 times higher risk of events with each increase of H-FABP(ln) by one unit.

Figure 1 shows Kaplan–Meier event curves according to the median concentrations of cTnT (0.02 ng/ml), BNP (138 pg/ml) and H-FABP (5.4 ng/ml). Patients with a concentration of cTnT  $\geq 0.02$  ng/ml had a similar survival rate to those with cTnT < 0.02 ng/ml (log rank test,  $p = 0.1585$ ). Patients with BNP  $\geq 138$  pg/ml had a significantly lower survival rate than those with BNP < 138 pg/ml (log rank test,  $p = 0.0008$ ). Patients with H-FABP  $\geq 5.4$  ng/ml had a significantly lower survival rate than those with H-FABP < 5.4 ng/ml (log rank test,  $p < 0.0001$ ). The area under the receiver operating characteristic curve for critical cardiac events was similar between H-FABP and BNP (0.853 v 0.848,  $p = 0.9322$ ). Thus, the prognostic value of the H-FABP concentration was comparable to that of the BNP concentration. When the H-FABP and BNP concentrations were combined to produce four segments (H-FABP  $\geq 5.4$  ng/ml and BNP < 138 pg/ml; H-FABP  $\geq 5.4$  ng/ml and BNP  $\geq 138$  pg/ml; H-FABP < 5.4 ng/ml and BNP < 138 pg/ml; H-FABP < 5.4 ng/ml and BNP  $\geq 138$  pg/ml) in the study population, patients with H-FABP  $\geq 5.4$  ng/ml and BNP  $\geq 138$  pg/ml had a lower survival rate (log rank test,  $p = 0.0002$ ) (fig 1D).

## DISCUSSION

In the present study, we showed that a serum concentration of H-FABP before discharge independently predicted the long-term risk of critical cardiac events in non-ischaeamic DCM. The predictive power of H-FABP was comparable to that of BNP.



**Figure 1** Kaplan–Meier event curves according to the median concentrations of (A) cardiac troponin T (cTnT), (B) brain natriuretic peptide (BNP), (C) heart-type fatty acid binding protein (H-FABP) and (D) H-FABP and BNP combined.

Furthermore, a combination of high-concentration BNP and high-concentration H-FABP yielded a worse prognosis.

cTnT concentrations were reported to rise in DCM<sup>15</sup> as well as in acute myocardial infarction.<sup>16</sup> The cut off value of 0.02 ng/ml in the present study was the same as that in a previous report on DCM.<sup>15</sup> cTnT is located in myofilaments, and its molecular weight (37.0 kDa) is greater than that of H-FABP (14.9 kDa), found in cytosol, which makes cTnT harder to detect than H-FABP. In fact, cTnT was detected in 36–46% of patients with acute myocardial infarction,<sup>16–17</sup> whereas H-FABP was detected in 93%.<sup>10</sup> In the present study, the concentrations of cTnT were similar between survivors and non-survivors. Two Kaplan–Meier event curves for patients over and under the cut off did not differ significantly. A sustained rise of cTnT for 16 months significantly and independently predicted adverse outcomes in DCM.<sup>15</sup> We assume that a point-of-care measurement of cTnT at a single time point may not closely reflect the severity of non-ischaemic DCM. A previous report on the predictability of cTnT for cardiac events in heart failure may be attributable to the ischaemic aetiology of heart failure.<sup>18</sup>

Ongoing myocardial damage in DCM may be one of the plausible mechanisms for the release of H-FABP.<sup>19</sup> The correlation between H-FABP concentration and heart failure severity, and the correlation between H-FABP concentration and BNP concentration were reported in a previous study.<sup>19</sup> Although that previous study<sup>19</sup> suggested that the prognostic power of H-FABP for cardiac events in DCM is comparable to that of BNP, we confirmed the role of H-FABP as a predictor in our four-year follow up. In the present study, an

endomyocardial biopsy did not provide evidence of overt active myocarditis in all of the patients. Our method did not thoroughly exclude the possibility of inactive and chronic inflammatory or viral cardiomyopathy causing non-ischaemic cardiomyopathy.<sup>20</sup> For any reason, a transient loss of cell membrane integrity may cause cytoplasmic molecules to leak into the bloodstream. These events may yield detectable biomarkers even in the absence of myocyte death. Although the present study did not identify known possible causes of non-ischaemic heart failure, such as chronic myocardial inflammation or chronic viral infection,<sup>1–21</sup> increased serum concentrations of H-FABP were shown to predict the long-term risk of critical cardiac events with a predictive power comparable to that of BNP, independently of the underlying causes. In this view, H-FABP may provide additional information for risk stratification and management of these patients with DCM. Whereas raised H-FABP concentrations reflect myocardial membrane damage, raised BNP concentrations reflect increased ventricular filling pressure. The combination of these two provides an index for a worse prognosis. Thus, H-FABP concentration may provide a novel estimate of the clinical outcome in DCM. Caution is needed in interpreting the present small study, which may have confounding associations of other variables. Thus, larger clinical trials would help to clarify the potential role of H-FABP in determining the prognosis of patients with DCM.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was partly supported by the Program for Promotion of Fundamental Studies in Health Sciences of the Pharmaceuticals and Medical Devices Agency (PMDA), Japan.

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## IMAGES IN CARDIOLOGY

doi: 10.1136/hrt.2005.075465

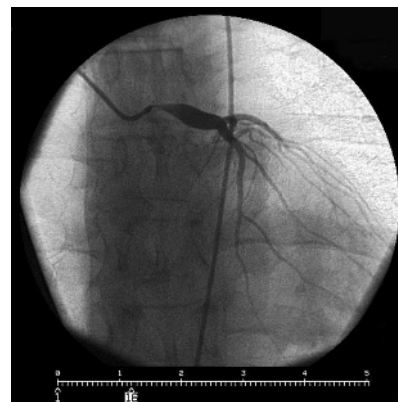
### Left main coronary artery stenosis associated with aortitis in a patient with Crohn's disease

A 45 year old woman with a 17 year history of Crohn's disease and small joint seronegative arthritis, presented with a two year history of exertional chest pain radiating to the jaw and arms, worse on exposure to the cold, which started after an exacerbation of her joint pain. She was a non-smoker with no hypertension, diabetes or hyperlipidaemia. She had clinical aortic incompetence, blood pressure 130/40 mm Hg, a loud early diastolic murmur and an ejection systolic murmur. Echocardiography showed a dilated left ventricle and severe aortic incompetence. Echocardiography two years previously had shown only minimal aortic incompetence.

Coronary angiography before planned aortic valve replacement showed critical ostial left main stem stenosis with a diameter less

than the diameter of a Judgkin's 5 French catheter but otherwise normal coronary arteries. At aortic valve replacement and bypass grafting she was found to have a pinhole osteum of her left main stem.

Aortic root disease now accounts for over 50% of patients presenting with aortic regurgitation requiring aortic valve replacement. In view of this patient's symptoms developing over a period of two years and occurring after an exacerbation of her arthritis and Crohn's disease, it is most likely that this lady had aortitis with inflammation extending into the left main coronary artery with resultant development of left main coronary stenosis.



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