Diagnostic accuracy of clinical diagnosis versus echocardiography in evaluating heart murmurs in Iraqi children

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To assess the diagnostic accuracy of clinical diagnosis versus echocardiography in evaluating childhood heart murmurs.

Methods: We investigated 107 children under the age of 10 years with heart murmurs admitted to 3 hospitals in Baghdad (Al-Khadimiyah Pediatric Hospital, Al-Karama Teaching Hospital/Pediatric Department and Al-Noor Teaching Hospital/Pediatric Department) during the period of January 1998 to January 2002. Data on age, gender, provisional clinical diagnosis and final echocardiographic diagnosis were taken. Statistical analysis through Chi-square was carried out.

Results: There were more males than females (58.9% versus 41.1%, p<0.05). Provisionally, diagnoses of pathological murmurs were made in 88.8% of patients compared with 11.2% for innocent murmurs. The most common pathological murmur was that of ventricular septal defect (58.9%) and the least was aortic stenosis (1.9%). Echocardiographically, pathological findings were seen in 62.6% of patients compared with 37.4% for normal results. Provisional and echocardiographic diagnoses were concordant in 52.3% of patients and discordant in 47.7%, a difference of highly statistical significance (p<0.001). The most common concordant and discordant diagnoses were ventricular septal defect and innocent murmurs.

Conclusion: Though echocardiography can be used to precisely evaluate heart murmurs, the role of comprehensive history taking and meticulous physical examination must not be neglected. Defect in specific accuracy of clinical acumen noted by the pediatricians who cared for the studied patients probably reflects their different standards in medical education and clinical training. Developing and implementing advanced physical diagnosis curriculum, establishing training programs in cardiology for pediatricians and provision of well-trained pediatric echocardiographers seem crucial. These options will eventually contain medical expenses.

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Congenital heart disease (CHD) occurs in 0.5-0.8% of live births.1 Heart murmurs signify stenosis or regurgitation of valves and left to right shunt lesions at the atrial, ventricular or great arterial level.2 However, proper approach revealed innocent murmurs in as many as 60-83% of all school age children.3,4 Pathological murmurs are defined as murmurs caused by an underlying structural abnormality of the heart. Early diagnosis is desirable to: 1. prevent serious complications in conditions that would otherwise be mild if treated; 2. identify adjuvant diagnostic or treatment interventions; 3. reduce the risk of bacterial endocarditis when indicated; 4. reassure parents of children with innocent murmurs.5

With the advent of color Doppler, echocardiography approaches near-perfect sensitivity and specificity

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in assessing heart murmurs. However, studies have shown that skill and confidence of history and physical examination among students, trainee residents and practicing physicians have waned.

Heart murmurs were evaluated in Iraqi adults, however, a debate still exists whether echocardiography remains the golden diagnostic means or clinical diagnosis is adequate in elucidating the nature of childhood heart murmurs. We, therefore, sought in this study to examine the issue in Iraqi children.

**Methods.** We investigated the medical records of 107 children aged below 10 years with heart murmurs admitted to 3 hospitals in Baghdad (Al-Khadimyiah Pediatric Hospital, Al-Karama Teaching Hospital, Pediatric Department and Al-Noor Teaching Hospital, Pediatric Department) during the period of January 1998 to January 2002. Data on age, gender, provisional diagnosis made clinically by the pediatricians who cared for the studied children in the aforementioned hospitals and final diagnosis made echocardiographically by pediatric echocardiographers were sought. Statistical analysis of data was performed using Chi-square. A p≤0.05 was regarded statistically significant.

**Results.** The studied sample involved 63 (58.9%) males and 44 (41.1%) females with a male to female ratio of 1.4:1. The mean age was 4.9 ± 2.81 (range 4 months-10 years). Those below age of 4 years constituted nearly two thirds of cases 64 (59.8%) compared to one third 34 (31.8%) within age group of 4-8 years while the least was noted above 8 years of age 9 (8.4%). Males significantly predominated females in studied sample (p<0.05) (Table 1).

Table 2 depicts the provisional diagnosis in studied sample. Diagnoses of pathological murmurs were established in 95 (88.8%) patients compared to 12 (11.2%) for innocent murmurs. The most common CHD diagnosed provisionally was that of VSD 63 (58.9%) followed by PDA 11 (10.3%) while the least was AS 2 (1.9%).

Table 3 illustrates the echocardiographic findings in relation to provisional diagnoses. Pathological findings were observed in 67 (62.7%) patients and normal findings in the remaining 40 (37.4%).

Table 4 shows the state of concordance between provisional and echocardiographic diagnoses in studied sample. Both diagnoses were concordant in 50 (52.3%) patients and discordant in the remaining 56 (47.7%). Such difference was of highly statistical significance (p<0.001). The most common concordant diagnosis was VSD 32 (29.9%) while the most common discordant one was innocent murmurs 34 (31.9%).

**Discussion.** For many years, clinical judgment has been a useful diagnostic tool and a key component of the patient-physician interaction. However, with the eruption of advanced medical technologies, clinical judgment and precision in approaching health problems have been questioned. Proper assessment of heart murmur is beneficial for several reasons: accuracy of diagnosis, physicians intellectual satisfaction, parental confidence in the physicians, avoidance of stress for the patient and parents and appropriate cost-effective use of medical resources.

The provisional diagnoses of pathological murmurs were made in 88.8% of patients compared to 11.2% for innocent murmurs but echocardiographically, pathological findings were found in 62.7% of patients and normal results were seen in the remaining 47.4%. Both diagnoses were concordant in 52.3% of patients and discordant in 47.7%. Such difference was of highly statistical significance (p<0.001). This discrepancy can be attributed to examiners misinterpretations or absence of classical findings.

The most common concordant diagnosis was VSD in 29.9% of patients. This may be due to observation...
that VSD constitutes 25-30% of all CHD and that its characteristic holosystolic murmur can be easily distinguished from other heart murmurs. On the other hand, the most common discordant diagnoses was innocent murmurs in 31.9% of patients. Considering other studies, innocent murmurs constitute nearly 60-83% of all heart murmurs. This augments the observation of increasing dependence of physicians on non-invasive tests rather than clinical judgment in approaching heart diseases.

Three elements are required for definitive diagnosis of innocent murmurs: 1. Pediatricians must recognize with confidence the auscultatory features of a specific innocent murmurs, notably still’s murmur, innocent pulmonary flow murmur, innocent pulmonary branch murmur of infancy, supraclavicular bruit, venous hum, mammary souffle and cardio-respiratory murmur. 2. A detailed history must be taken and found negative for symptoms that might be attributed to a CHD. 3. A detailed physical examination must be performed searching for other signs of CHD and these signs must be absent. If these 3 elements are met, further laboratory confirmation with ECG, chest x-ray and echocardiography is usually unwarranted. Absence of any of these elements is an indication for further evaluation.

Sets of investigators found that direct referral for echocardiography was an expensive way to evaluate children with heart murmurs. Others announced that pediatric echocardiograms performed in adult laboratories were questionable in terms of being unnecessary in some, of inadequate quality in others and resulted in an erroneous impression of the nature or presence of pathological disease.

The reported defect in specific accuracy of the clinical diagnosis probably reflects the training skills and experiences of the pediatricians. It is fortuitous time to pursue the development, implementation and evaluation of advanced physical diagnosis curriculum for medical students and establishing specific training programs in cardiology for pediatricians. Moreover: echocardiography must be carried out by well-trained pediatric echocardiographers. These options will eventually save unnecessary financial loss.

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References

Clinical diagnosis in evaluating heart murmurs ...


