Original research

Alarming downturn in mechanical thrombectomy rates in African American patients during the COVID-19 pandemic—Insights from STAR


ABSTRACT

Background The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has affected stroke care globally. In this study, we aim to evaluate the impact of the current pandemic on racial disparities among stroke patients receiving mechanical thrombectomy (MT).

Methods We used the prospectively collected data in the Stroke Thrombectomy and Aneurysm Registry (STAR) to assess the time course of MT procedures at 12 stroke centers from the United States and Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic. We compared baseline features, vascular risk factors, location of occlusion, procedural metrics, complications, and discharge outcomes between patients presenting before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Results We identified 2083 stroke patients: of those 235 (11.3%) underwent MT during the COVID-19 pandemic. Compared with pre-pandemic, patients who underwent MT during the pandemic had longer procedure duration (44 vs 38 min, P=0.006), longer length of hospitalization (6 vs 4 days, P<0.001), and higher in-hospital mortality (18.7% vs 11%, P=0.001). Importantly, there was a lower number of African American patients receiving MT during the COVID-19 pandemic (609 (32.9%) vs 56 (23.8%); P=0.004).

Conclusion The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the care process for stroke patients receiving MT globally. There is a significant decline in the number of African American patients receiving MT, which mandates further investigation.

INTRODUCTION

The Coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has affected all aspects of medical care for various conditions. Several studies reported a potential relationship between COVID-19 infection and high-risk stroke secondary to large vessel occlusion (LVO). Importantly, recent studies reported a significant decline in the number of patients presenting with acute stroke, raising concerns that stroke patients are avoiding hospitals for various reasons including fear of COVID-19 infection. Evidence from recently published studies suggested that this decline disproportionally affects African American (AA) patients, widening the already existing racial disparity in stroke care. In this study, we aimed to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the racial disparities related to MT.

METHODS

Patient population and collected variables

Prospectively collected data from 12 thrombectomy-capable stroke centers included in the Stroke Thrombectomy and Aneurysm Registry (STAR) collaboration was interrogated to identify stroke patients who received mechanical thrombectomy (MT) between January 2017 and May 2020. Eleven of the included centers are located in the United States and one in Germany. Patients who presented before February 2020 were considered pre-COVID-19 pandemic and patients who presented after February 2020 were considered during the COVID-19 pandemic. We compared baseline demographics, procedural metrics, and outcomes between patients undergoing MT before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Approval from the Institutional Review Board at the Medical University of South Carolina was obtained, and no consent was needed per the institutional policy.

Statistical analysis

We used univariate analysis to report patient demographic and clinical characteristics using median and IQR for continuous variables and percentages for categorical variables. Characteristics of groups were compared using the Mann–Whitney U test, and chi-square as appropriate. To assess for the relationship between the rate of AA (or Black Europeans of African ancestry) patients receiving MT and COVID-19 pandemic controlling for the center of presentation, we used the Cochran Mantel Haenszel test. An alpha level of 0.05 was used as the level of statistical significance. The analysis was conducted using SPSS v25 (IBM Corporation, New York, NY).

RESULTS

Patients’ characteristics

A total of 2083 stroke patients were included in this study, 1848 (88.7%) underwent MT before the
COVID-19 pandemic and 235 (11.3%) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The median age was 69 (IQR 58–79) years, admission National Institure of Health Stroke Scale (NIHSS) 16 (10-21), and Alberta Stroke Program Eartly CT Score (ASPECTS) 9 (IQR 7–10). Online supplemental table I summarizes baseline features and clinical outcomes. The racial/ethnic distribution of the included patients was as follows: 1197 (57.8%) white, 665 (31.9%) AA, 215 (10.3%) Hispanic, and six (0.3%) others.

**Before vs. during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Table 1 summarizes the comparison between stroke patients who underwent MT before vs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Five (2.1%) of the MT patients during the pandemic were positive for COVID-19 polymerase chain reaction (PCR) in nasopharyngeal swap. Significant differences in patients undergoing MT during the COVID-19 pandemic include: longer procedure duration (44 vs 38 min, P=0.006), longer length of hospitalization (6 vs 4, P<0.001), lower discharge mRS (4 vs 3, P=0.015), and higher in-hospital mortality (18.7% vs 11%, P<0.001), compared with patients who underwent MT before the pandemic. While the difference between the symptom onset to groin time was not significant in the overall population (P=0.065) and in non-AA patients (P=0.278), AA patients had longer onset to groin time during the COVID-19 pandemic (362 vs 275 min, P=0.047). In addition, the percentage of AA patients who underwent MT in the included centers decreased from 609/1848 (32.9%) before the COVID-19 pandemic to 56/235 (23.8%) during the COVID-19 pandemic (P=0.004). No interaction was noted between the percentage of AA patients receiving thrombectomy and the centers that performed the thrombectomy before and after the COVID-19 pandemic (P=0.192). No other statistically significant differences were noted in other races/ethnicities. Figure 1 shows the trend in the rate of AA patients receiving mechanical thrombectomy during the study period. Online supplemental tables II and III show the comparison between AA and non-AA thrombectomy patients before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**DISCUSSION**

In this multicenter, international study, we evaluated the procedural metrics and outcomes of MT patients presenting during the COVID-19 pandemic compared with patients presenting during the...
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3 prior years. We have found that patients who presented during the pandemic required a longer procedure time and had a higher rate of mortality. While only 2.1% of these patients were positive for COVID-19 PCR, these findings likely reflect the effect of COVID-19 precautions and the changes in healthcare workflow protocols.

Additional significant findings from our analyses included a reduction in the number of AA patients undergoing MT, which is highly alarming because racial disparities in cerebrovascular diseases care already exist. AA patients have higher vascular risk factors, and experience higher stroke-related in-hospital mortality. Also, studies have shown that AA/Hispanic patients are more likely to have received aneurysm treatment following a subarachnoid hemorrhage rather than getting treatment in the early stages for unruptured aneurysm.

The reduction in the number of AA patients receiving MT during the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to widen the gap in racial disparities given that most patients with emergent LVO would suffer from significant long-term disability if they do not receive treatment. A recent study evaluating racial disparities among patients evaluated over a large telestroke network reported a significant drop among AA patients with acute ischemic stroke. The overall drop in the number of AA patients presenting with acute stroke is likely given that most patients with emergent LVO would suffer from significant long-term disability if they do not receive treatment. Also, there is a decline in the number of AA patients receiving MT during the COVID-19 pandemic reported recently by Schirmer et al. One of the proposed causes for this delay is the changes in stroke triage protocols during the pandemic.

Our study has a few limitations. First, our study is limited by its observational nature. Also, our study does not provide information related to the relationship between COVID-19 infection and emergent LVO. However, our study provides multicentric, early observations stroke centers in different regions.

CONCLUSION
Stroke patients receiving MT during the COVID-19 pandemic had a longer procedure duration and a higher mortality rate compared with patients presenting before the pandemic. Also, there is a decline in the number of AA patients receiving MT during the pandemic, which demonstrates the need for more work in the public health domain to educate patients with the importance of prompt medical evaluation for all those suffering from stroke symptoms.

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Funding The authors have not declared a specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.


Patient consent for publication Not required.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

Data availability statement Data are available upon reasonable request. Data are available upon reasonable request.

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Supplementary Appendix

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**Table I**: Characteristics, procedural metrics, and outcomes of all stroke patients undergoing mechanical thrombectomy during the study period (January 2017 to May 2020).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>All mechanical thrombectomy patients during study period (n=2083)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age, median (IQR)</td>
<td>69 (58-79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females, n (%)</td>
<td>1014 (48.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admission NIHSS, median (IQR)</td>
<td>16 (10-21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV-tPA, n (%)</td>
<td>937 (45%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASPECTS, median (IQR)†</td>
<td>9 (7-10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posterior circulation occlusion, n (%)</td>
<td>216 (10.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symptom-onset to groin in minutes, median (IQR)</td>
<td>292 (180-575)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of passes, median (IQR)</td>
<td>2 (1-3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mTICI2b, n (%)</td>
<td>1784 (85.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure duration in minutes, median (IQR)</td>
<td>38 (21-64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure complications, n (%)</td>
<td>183 (8.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sICH, n (%)</td>
<td>123 (5.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of stay in days, median (IQR)</td>
<td>4 (2-6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DC mRS, median (IQR)</td>
<td>3 (2-5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional independence on discharge (mRS 0-2), n (%)</td>
<td>714 (34.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-hospital mortality, n (%)</td>
<td>247 (11.9%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

§Only for patients with anterior circulation occlusion

†Calculated using chi-square test (or Fisher exact test for cells<5) for categorical variables and Mann-Whitney U test for the continuous variables.

Abbreviations: ASPECTS: Alberta Stroke Program Early CT score, COVID: coronavirus disease of 2019, IQR: interquartile range, IV-tPA: intravenous tissue plasminogen activator, LKN: last known normal, mRS: modified Rankin scale, mTICI: modified Thrombolysis in Cerebral Infarction, NIHSS: National Institute of Health stroke scale, sICH: symptomatic intracerebral hematoma.
Table II: Characteristics, procedural metrics, and outcomes of patients receiving mechanical thrombectomy before COVID-19 pandemic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>African American patients (n=609)</th>
<th>Non-African American patients (n=1239)</th>
<th>P-value†</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age, median (IQR)</td>
<td>63 (54-74)</td>
<td>71 (61-81)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females, n (%)</td>
<td>305 (50.1%)</td>
<td>596 (48.1%)</td>
<td>0.424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admission NIHSS, median (IQR)</td>
<td>16 (10-20)</td>
<td>16 (10-21)</td>
<td>0.821</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV-tPA, n (%)</td>
<td>285 (46.8%)</td>
<td>546 (44.1%)</td>
<td>0.267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASPECTS, median (IQR)§</td>
<td>9 (7-10)</td>
<td>9 (7-10)</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posterior circulation occlusion, n (%)</td>
<td>72 (11.8%)</td>
<td>123 (9.9%)</td>
<td>0.213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symptom-onset to groin in minutes, median (IQR)</td>
<td>275 (175-557)</td>
<td>292 (178-589)</td>
<td>0.222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of passes, median (IQR)</td>
<td>1 (1-3)</td>
<td>2 (1-3)</td>
<td>0.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mTICI≥2b, n (%)</td>
<td>520 (85.4%)</td>
<td>1068 (86.2%)</td>
<td>0.637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure duration in minutes, median (IQR)</td>
<td>39 (23-64)</td>
<td>37 (20-63)</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure complications, n (%)</td>
<td>56 (6.2%)</td>
<td>107 (8.6%)</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sICH, n (%)</td>
<td>34 (5.6%)</td>
<td>74 (6%)</td>
<td>0.737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of stay in days, median (IQR)</td>
<td>3 (2-5)</td>
<td>4 (2-6)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DC mRS, median (IQR)</td>
<td>3 (2-4)</td>
<td>4 (2-5)</td>
<td>0.015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional independence on discharge (mRS 0-2), n (%)</td>
<td>226 (37.1%)</td>
<td>401 (32.4%)</td>
<td>0.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-hospital mortality, n (%)</td>
<td>45 (7.4%)</td>
<td>158 (12.8%)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

§Only for patients with anterior circulation occlusion
†Calculated using chi-square test for categorical variables and Mann-Whitney U test for the continuous variables.

Abbreviations: ASPECTS: Alberta Stroke Program Early CT score, COVID: coronavirus disease of 2019, IQR: interquartile range, IV-tPA: intravenous tissue plasminogen
activator, LKN: last known normal, mRS: modified Rankin scale, mTICI: modified Thrombolysis in Cerebral Infarction, NIHSS: National Institute of Health stroke scale, sICH: symptomatic intracerebral hematoma
Table III: Characteristics, procedural metrics, and outcomes of patients receiving mechanical thrombectomy during COVID-19 pandemic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>African American patients (n=56)</th>
<th>Non-African American patients (n=179)</th>
<th>P-value†</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age, median (IQR)</td>
<td>67 (57-74)</td>
<td>73 (62-80)</td>
<td>0.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females, n (%)</td>
<td>24 (48.2%)</td>
<td>86 (48%)</td>
<td>0.982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admission NIHSS, median (IQR)</td>
<td>17 (10-23)</td>
<td>15 (10-20)</td>
<td>0.293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV-tPA, n (%)</td>
<td>25 (44.6%)</td>
<td>81 (45.3%)</td>
<td>0.936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASPECTS, median (IQR)§</td>
<td>9 (6-10)</td>
<td>9 (7-10)</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posterior circulation occlusion, n (%)</td>
<td>3 (5.4%)</td>
<td>18 (10.1%)</td>
<td>0.282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symptom-onset to groin in minutes, median (IQR)</td>
<td>362 (205-495)</td>
<td>336 (201-597)</td>
<td>0.636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of passes, median (IQR)</td>
<td>1 (1-3)</td>
<td>2 (1-3)</td>
<td>0.033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mTICl≥2b, n (%)</td>
<td>47 (83.9%)</td>
<td>149 (8.32%)</td>
<td>0.904</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure duration in minutes, median (IQR)</td>
<td>36 (23-64)</td>
<td>47 (26-76)</td>
<td>0.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure complications, n (%)</td>
<td>6 (10.7%)</td>
<td>14 (7.8%)</td>
<td>0.498</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sICH, n (%)</td>
<td>4 (7.1%)</td>
<td>11 (6.1%)</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of stay in days, median (IQR)</td>
<td>6 (4-12)</td>
<td>5 (3-9)</td>
<td>0.114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DC mRS, median (IQR)</td>
<td>4 (2-4)</td>
<td>4 (2-5)</td>
<td>0.884</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional independence on discharge (mRS 0-2), n (%)</td>
<td>24 (42.9%)</td>
<td>61 (34.1%)</td>
<td>0.233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-hospital mortality, n (%)</td>
<td>8 (14.3%)</td>
<td>36 (20.1%)</td>
<td>0.329</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

§Only for patients with anterior circulation occlusion

†Calculated using chi-square test (or Fisher exact test for cells<5) for categorical variables and Mann-Whitney U test for the continuous variables.

Abbreviations: ASPECTS: Alberta Stroke Program Early CT score, COVID: coronavirus disease of 2019, IQR: interquartile range, IV-tPA: intravenous tissue plasminogen
activator, LKN: last known normal, mRS: modified Rankin scale, mTICI: modified Thrombolysis in Cerebral Infarction, NIHSS: National Institute of Health stroke scale, sICH: symptomatic intracerebral hematoma.