EDITORIAL COMMENT

Hand-Held Echocardiography: Revolution or Hassle?*

Nelson B. Schiller, MD, FACC
San Francisco, California

Running apace with progress in electronics, the echocardiography industry has rapidly integrated innovations into instrument design; in so doing, this modality has become the central diagnostic tool in cardiology. Generally, active echocardiography laboratories use “high-end” instruments that have advanced features. When operated by skilled sonographers and supervised by experienced physicians, an echocardiogram/Doppler examination can accurately identify and grade any and all valve diseases, congenital defects, pericardial diseases, myocardial hypertrophy and myopathy, ventricular systolic and diastolic dysfunction and, with stress, many ischemic syndromes. By integrating Doppler information with anatomic data, hemodynamics such as pulmonary artery-pressure or left ventricular (LV) filling pressure can be accurately deduced and provide a framework for constructing treatment algorithms. Patients referred to a modern echocardiography laboratory for suspected heart disease can expect to benefit from an accurate and comprehensive diagnostic evaluation.

Most recently, advances in electronics have enabled the ultrasound industry to create an echocardiography machine the size of a laptop computer. Inexpensive (relatively), compact and portable, these battery-operated devices enable a cardiologist to have a personal imager at the point of patient contact. If these devices are miniaturized but fully functional instruments and their performance in the hands of practitioners equivalent to a sonographer operating a laboratory instrument, a revolution in the utilization and delivery of echocardiography services will have begun with consequences that will include changes in availability, reimbursement, sonography utilization and physician practices. However, if the new devices prove to be mere derivatives of laboratory-grade instruments, they may prove to be more hassle than help and they will join tissue characterization, automated edge tracking, second-generation contrast agents and real-time three-dimensional imagers as exciting ideas that may not achieve commercial viability.

In this issue of the Journal, Spencer et al. (1) investigated the impact of physician use of a hand-held echocardiograph in the context of contemporary practice. Four board-certified cardiologists with a mean practice experience of five years and level II training in echocardiography (exposure typical of a clinical fellowship) were asked to perform a physical examination on 36 selected subjects with common cardiac lesions of varying severity. Immediately following, the physician imaged the patient with the hand-held echocardiograph. Both the results of the physical examination and the point of care echocardiogram were compared to a standard echocardiogram performed by an experienced sonographer using a high-end instrument.

The study found that physical examination failed to detect 59% of all cardiovascular conditions and 43% of major findings. For example, 2 of 7 with aortic stenosis, 5 of 6 with hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, 3 of 6 with mitral stenosis and 14 of 21 with LV dysfunction had their conditions missed by physical examination. After point of care echocardiography, the number of missed lesions fell to 29% overall and 21% if major. The 21% included 1 of 7 aortic stenosis, 3 of 6 hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, 5 of 21 decreased LV function and 3 of 8 decreased right ventricular function.

Superficially, these findings seem to indicate that physical examination skills have deteriorated when compared to standards during the “golden age” of cardiology (whenever that was). If true, hand-held echocardiography may be recommended on this basis alone. However, yearning for halcyon days may be based more on nostalgia than reality. For example, in the pre-echocardiography era, routine quantitation of LV function was not available and physical examination for this purpose could not have been rigorously tested. Similarly, when physical examination was ascendant (and largely uncontested), hypertrophic cardiomyopathy was largely unknown. Thus, at least some of the apparent deficiencies in physical examination revealed in this study are more likely related to an increase in performance expectations traceable directly to the role of echocardiography itself in current practice.

The findings of this study also raise several questions that will need to be addressed. If the study were continued by adding more groups of patients, how would physical examination skills and echocardiographic skills of these relatively inexperienced physicians evolve? What would be the results if the study had been performed with more clinically seasoned cardiologists with more remote echocardiography training? How much time does this procedure add to each patient encounter and does this additional time expenditure render the use of point of contact echocardiography impractical? What are the financial consequences beyond the physician’s time commitment? Will third-party payers further reduce reimbursements for echocardiography services? Will a change in reimbursement further hasten the imminent conversion of echocardiography laboratories from...
While I can say that I am better off with access to the device than without it, the lack of a proper examining surface (excavated mattress or access from the left) in most clinical situations, the size of the transducer and the lighting conditions on the ward require considerable technical agility to obtain the desired information. Furthermore, in the context of clinical practice, routine use of this device is likely to be more time-consuming than allowed by the pace of modern practice.

Those planning to use this device should take care in positioning the patient in order to optimize access to imaging windows, should control the ambient lighting and possess the requisite skills. If you are echocardiographically challenged because you have not performed many studies yourself, these devices will amplify your deficiencies and may be more hassle than help, if not dangerously misleading. If you use Doppler for hemodynamics, valve disease and diastolic function, you simply will not have these data.

What is the future of this development in echocardiography? Its evolution beyond a niche technique depends on the willingness of manufacturers and their investors to overcome the gulf between the revolution promised in the hyperbolic rhetoric of the business plan or advertisement and the reality of clinical cardiology. That reality is that the widespread dissemination of units may lag until more studies like those of Spencer et al. (1) and Goodkin et al. (2) are published and digested, until instruments are fully equipped and fully functional and until physicians themselves decide that it is desirable to disassemble current practice and endure the hassle of performing echocardiograms themselves. Alternatively, we may be on the threshold of presenting our sonographers with a revolutionary generation of cost-effective, efficient equipment with which to continue their major contributions to patient management.

Reprint request and correspondence: Dr. Nelson B. Schiller, UCSF Medical Center, Parnassus Avenue, Box 0214, Room 314A Moffitt, San Francisco, California 94143-0214. E-mail: schiller@medicine.ucsf.edu.

REFERENCES