P2Y₁₂ Receptor Antagonists and Morphine: A Dangerous Liaison?

Georgios Giannopoulos, MD; Spyridon Deftereos, MD; Fotios Kolokathis, MD; Ioanna Xanthopoulou, MD; John Lekakis, MD; Dimitrios Alexopoulos, MD

Abstract—P2Y₁₂ receptor antagonists, concurrently administered with aspirin in what has come to be commonly called dual antiplatelet therapy, are a mainstay of treatment for patients with acute coronary syndromes (ACS), from the acute phase until at least 12 months after the index event. Morphine, on the contrary, is a nonessential but commonly used drug in the acute phase of ACS to relieve pain—with the added potential benefit of attenuating acutely raised sympathetic tone. In current guidelines though, morphine is recommended with decreasing strength of recommendation. One reason is that it raises concern regarding the potentially significant interaction with antiplatelet agents, leading to impaired inhibition of platelet activation. In any case, it is still considered a mandatory part of the inventory of available medications in prehospital acute myocardial infarction management. The goal of the present review is to present published evidence on morphine and its potential interactions with P2Y₁₂ receptor antagonists, as well as on the central issue of whether such interactions may underlie clinically significant effects on patient outcomes.

Key Words: acute coronary syndrome • antiplatelet drug resistance • antiplatelet therapy • inhibition • interaction • opioid

P2Y₁₂ receptor antagonists, concurrently administered with aspirin in what has come to be commonly called dual antiplatelet therapy, are a mainstay of treatment for patients with acute coronary syndromes (ACS), from the acute phase until at least 12 months after the index event. Morphine, on the contrary, is a nonessential but commonly used drug in the acute phase of ACS to relieve pain—with the added potential benefit of attenuating acutely raised sympathetic tone. In current guidelines though, morphine is recommended with decreasing strength of recommendation. One of the reasons being raised concerns regarding the potentially significant drug-to-drug interactions with antiplatelet agents, leading to impaired inhibition of platelet activation. In any case, it is still considered a mandatory part of the inventory of available medications in prehospital acute myocardial infarction management.

The goal of the present review is to present published evidence on morphine and its potential interactions with P2Y₁₂ receptor antagonists, as well as on the central issue of whether such interactions may underlie clinically significant effects on patient outcomes.

P2Y₁₂ Antagonists and Morphine: Pharmacokinetic and Pharmacodynamic Evidence

Clopidogrel

There is substantial evidence that morphine affects clopidogrel kinetics and pharmacodynamic effects. In a sample of 24 healthy volunteers, Hobl et al. showed that intravenous morphine delayed the absorption of clopidogrel, although the area under the curve of clopidogrel concentration did not differ significantly between groups, and maximal inhibition of platelet aggregation was delayed by 1.75 hours: 3 versus 1.25 hours in morphine- versus placebo-treated subjects, respectively (P<0.001). In addition, residual platelet reactivity was higher for 5 hours after morphine injection in comparison with placebo. In the setting of ACS, data are scarce. Zeymer et al. have presented results from the ETAMI trial (Early Thienopyridine treatment to improve primary PCI in Patients with Acute Myocardial Infarction), suggesting that morphine was associated with higher platelet reactivity at 2 hours, but less so at 4 hours.

Prasugrel and Ticagrelor

With respect to novel P2Y₁₂ antagonists, there is also evidence that morphine coadministration with prasugrel or ticagrelor may result in increased platelet reactivity. In the RAPID (Rapid Activity of Platelet Inhibitor Drugs) Primary Percutaneous Coronary Intervention (PCI) Study, which randomized 50 patients with ST-segment–elevation myocardial infarction (STEMI) to prasugrel or ticagrelor, morphine use was an independent predictor of high residual platelet reactivity, that is, platelet reactivity units ≥240, 2 hours after the loading dose (odds ratio with morphine use 5.29; 95% confidence interval 1.44–19.49; P=0.012), in a multivariable model adjusted for age, body mass index, diabetes mellitus, ejection fraction, cardiogenic shock, randomization arm, and baseline platelet...
reactivity. However, the limitation of potential model overfitting should be noted, considering that a binary logistic regression model with 8 predictors was constructed in a sample with 25 positive outcomes for the dependent variable, that is, high residual platelet reactivity. Still, in a similar study in 50 STEMI patients, where a double loading dose of ticagrelor was used (RAPID 2 study), morphine use was again an independent predictor of high residual platelet reactivity (odds ratio with morphine use 4.49; 95% confidence interval 1.19–16.88; \( P=0.026 \)) 1 hour after the loading dose, after adjustment for age, body mass index, diabetes mellitus, and baseline platelet reactivity. In a randomized study, Kubica et al studied the effect of intravenous morphine 5 mg on the pharmacokinetic and pharmacodynamic profile of 180 mg ticagrelor in 70 patients with acute myocardial infarction. Morphine was associated with lower total exposure to ticagrelor (36% smaller area under the concentration curve; \( P=0.003 \)) and its active metabolite AR-C124910XX (37% smaller area under the concentration curve; \( P=0.008 \)), delayed maximal plasma concentration (the median time to achieve maximal concentration of ticagrelor in plasma was 4 hours in patients who took morphine compared with 2 hours in controls), and lower maximal plasma concentration (\( P=0.006 \)). At 2 hours after the loading dose, the proportion of patients with high residual platelet reactivity was 57% in the morphine group versus 29% in controls (\( P=0.03 \)). Delayed onset of action when ticagrelor was coadministered with morphine was also reported in another study in 37 STEMI patients, where morphine administration was associated with significantly higher platelet reactivity at 1 and 6 hours after the loading dose of ticagrelor. The same, by and large, was shown for prasugrel in a small crossover study showed in a group of 12 healthy volunteers resulting in reduced maximal plasma concentration without any significant interference with platelet inhibition. It should be noted though that observations from healthy volunteers may not apply in ACS patients, considering that in the absence of acute platelet overactivation (which is the case in ACS), lower or delayed exposure to the antiplatelet agents may suffice for adequate platelet inhibition. Studies in healthy individuals are of course useful, but should be supplemented by more real-world data from ACS populations. In this setting, Franchi et al evaluated different loading doses of ticagrelor and the effect of morphine in 52 STEMI patients. Absorption of ticagrelor was slightly delayed by morphine (mean time to maximal concentration in plasma 5.6 versus 4.9 hours), and platelet reactivity levels were higher at 30 minutes after loading dose (\( P=0.018 \)), but not significantly different at all other study time points between patients who took morphine and those who did not. Differences in rates of high residual platelet reactivity were not significant, and morphine was not an independent predictor of high on-treatment platelet reactivity. These ambivalent or negative results regarding the effect of morphine on the pharmacodynamics of novel P2Y\textsubscript{12} receptor antagonists cast doubt on the real magnitude of this interaction, as well as its relevance in different clinical scenarios. A concise description of published studies is provided in the Table.

**Clinical Outcomes and Morphine**

As important as the evidence regarding the effect of morphine on the pharmacokinetics and pharmacodynamics of P2Y\textsubscript{12} receptor antagonists may be, the real clinical issue lies in whether morphine use is actually associated with worse clinical outcomes. One of the first reports suggesting that there is truly a signal
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ADP indicates adenosine diphosphate; ASPI, arachidonic acid platelet aggregation; AUC, area under the curve; $C_{\text{max}}$, maximal concentration in plasma; PCI, percutaneous coronary intervention; PD, pharmacodynamics; PK, pharmacokinetics; PRU, P2Y<sub>12</sub> reactivity units; STEMI, ST-segment–elevation myocardial infarction; $T_{\text{max}}$, time to maximal concentration in plasma; TRAP, thrombin receptor activating peptide; and VASP-PRI, vasodilator-stimulated phosphoprotein platelet reactivity index.
of a deleterious effect of morphine came from the CRUSADE registry (Can Rapid Risk Stratification of Unstable Angina Patients Suppress Adverse Outcomes with Early Implementation of the ACC/AHA Guidelines). Among 57,039 patients with non-STEMI, 17,003 received morphine. The raw data analysis showed increased risk for clinical events associated with morphine use, including higher in-hospital mortality (odds ratio 1.22, 95% confidence interval 1.10–1.34). After extensive adjustment for a large array of clinical and demographic risk factors, this association persisted (odds ratio 1.48, 95% confidence interval 1.33–1.64) and was consistent across various patient subgroups (Figure 1). The same result was obtained in a propensity-matched subcohort of 33,972 patients (odds ratio 1.41, 95% confidence interval 1.26–1.57). These observations are certainly compelling; however, there are several important limitations. This was a registry—not a randomized study of morphine—and as a result, there were significant differences in the clinical and demographic background between patients who received morphine and those who did not. Multivariable adjustment and propensity score analysis may have remedied this, at least in part, but the possibility of a residual effect of unaccounted confounders cannot be discounted. In addition, patient treatment cannot possibly be considered to be current with 2016 standards, taking into account that only 40% of patients were treated with a P2Y12 receptor antagonist (clopidogrel) and just 66% were catheterized and 37% had a PCI performed during the index hospitalization, which is low considering that 88% had positive catheterized and 37% had a PCI performed during the index hospitalization. In summary, according to this analysis of the CRUSADE registry population of ≈5500 patients.

In a smaller study of 765 patients with STEMI and 993 patients with non-STEMI from the Acute Coronary Syndrome Israeli Survey 2008 database, intravenous narcotics use was not associated with 30-day mortality after propensity score matching and multivariable adjustment (odds ratio 0.40, 95% confidence interval 0.14–1.14, for STEMI and 0.56, 95% confidence interval 0.11–2.07, for non-STEMI patients). The raw mortality rate was lower among patients who received intravenous narcotics.

**Mechanistic Insights**

An obvious mechanism for the interaction between P2Y12 receptor antagonists and morphine is the inhibition of gastric emptying, which can result in marked delays in the absorption of orally administered drugs. This effect is important for clopidogrel, which is almost entirely absorbed in the intestine, and the same is true for ticagrelor and prasugrel. The emetic effect of morphine may also interfere with oral administration of antiplatelet agents, and this raises the question of whether cangrelor, a recently approved potent intravenous P2Y12 receptor antagonist, would be unaffected by concurrent opioid use. On the contrary, there is also evidence that opioid agonists may be involved in favorable cardioprotective effects on the myocardium. Morphine, for example, has been shown to enhance conditioning effects in the setting of ACS and was associated with perioperative cardioprotection (in terms of preservation of contractile function and reduced cardiac biomarker release) in patients undergoing cardiac surgery. These data suggest that from a mechanistic point of view, there is no clear-cut picture regarding the overall—beneficial or adverse—effect of morphine in ACS patients.

The mechanism underlying the effect of morphine on P2Y12 receptor antagonist absorption is also relevant for the question of whether other opioid receptor agonists, including pethidine and fentanyl, have similar effects. Unfortunately, there is no sufficient evidence as to the existence and effect size of such potential interactions. One might argue that

![Figure 1. Adjusted odds ratios of in-hospital mortality with morphine use across subgroups in the CRUSADE registry (Can Rapid Risk Stratification of Unstable Angina Patients Suppress Adverse Outcomes with Early Implementation of the ACC/AHA Guidelines). CHF indicates chronic heart failure. Reproduced from Meine et al with permission. Copyright ©2005, Elsevier.](http://circinterventions.ahajournals.org/Downloaded from)

(adjusted odds ratio 1.71, 95% confidence interval 1.02–2.87); however, there was no difference in clinical events (a combined end point of death or nonfatal myocardial infarction) in a median follow-up of 16 months—although this study was obviously underpowered for this end point.

On the other hand, in 2438 patients with STEMI from the FAST-MI 2010 cohort (French Registry of Acute Coronary Syndrome), morphine was not associated with higher risk of clinical events, including death (adjusted odds ratio 0.48, 95% confidence interval 0.12–1.85) and stent thrombosis (adjusted odds ratio 1.31, 95% confidence interval 0.36–4.74). The latter end point is evidently of particular interest for the issue of morphine effects on P2Y12 receptor antagonist effectiveness. One-year crude mortality was lower among patients who were given morphine, although after adjustment this difference became nonsignificant (adjusted hazard ratio 0.69, 95% confidence interval 0.35–1.37; Figure 2). Of note, the same results were replicated in the FAST-MI 2005 cohort (3059 STEMI patients). In summary, according to this analysis of the FAST-MI cohorts, morphine was not associated with higher rate of clinical events or 1-year mortality in a total STEMI population of ≈5500 patients.

![Figure 1. Adjusted odds ratios of in-hospital mortality with morphine use across subgroups in the CRUSADE registry (Can Rapid Risk Stratification of Unstable Angina Patients Suppress Adverse Outcomes with Early Implementation of the ACC/AHA Guidelines). CHF indicates chronic heart failure. Reproduced from Meine et al with permission. Copyright ©2005, Elsevier.](http://circinterventions.ahajournals.org/Downloaded from)
because all opioids affect gut motility and increase gastrointestinal transit time, they should affect antiplatelet agent absorption in a similar way. On the other hand, existing evidence suggests that there is a differential involvement of μ-opioid receptor sites and responsible regions for the different opioid agonists, which means that they may cause reduced gastrointestinal motility through different mechanisms, and the degree of induced dysmotility may vary. In view of the above considerations, generalization of the observations regarding morphine to all opioids should be done with some reserve—at least until more evidence becomes available.

**Conclusions**

The weight of existing pharmacokinetic and pharmacodynamic evidence suggests an adverse effect of morphine on platelet inhibition by P2Y₁₂ receptor antagonists, although there are some conflicting reports, especially as far as prasugrel and ticagrelor are concerned. This interaction is most possibly because of the inhibitory effect of opioids on gut motility. On the contrary, there is no definitive evidence that morphine use is associated with higher rate of hard clinical end points in the setting of current management of STEMI and non-STEMI patients treated with PCI, and the lack of randomized studies with clinical end points precludes drawing incontrovertible informed conclusions. In addition to this central unresolved issue regarding the true clinical significance of the observed interaction in terms of hard outcomes, future research should probably address other aspects of the situation as well, including the generalizability of findings regarding morphine to other opioids, the exact mechanisms underlying the observed interactions, the efficacy of potential measures that could counteract inadequate platelet inhibition resulting from these interactions (eg, novel opioid antagonists are being tested, which inhibit peripheral/gastrointestinal morphine effects, with no or minimal antagonism in the central nervous system⁵⁶,⁵⁷), and the relative significance of these effects in different patient subgroups and clinical settings. Another question to be answered is whether there are significant differences between available P2Y₁₂ receptor antagonists, in terms of their susceptibility to be affected, pharmacodynamically or pharmacokinetically, by morphine.

In this context, erring on the side of safety seems to be the smart choice, meaning that opioids should probably not be used unless considered truly necessary in patients with ACS. In this respect, including opioid analgesia in routine prehospital or emergency room protocols for STEMI or non-STEMI patients should probably be discontinued because—until further and better evidence is available—coadministration of morphine with P2Y₁₂ receptor antagonists should be a careful benefit-over-harm ratio—considering choice.

**Disclosures**

None.

**References**


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