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REVIEW PAPER

When the brain bleeds, and the blood betrays: coagulopathy in neurotrauma

Sharma M[1], Srivastava C[2], Yadav AK[3], Singh A[4], Choudhury C[5]

***Address for correspondence**:*
[1]Assistant Professor (B)
(Corresponding author)
Mobile No. +919706582392
mitrajitsurgery@gmail.com
[2]Professor
Mobile No. +919335257029
drchhitij@yahoo.co.in
[3]Additional Professor
Mobile N: +919919282888
awkymail@gmail.com
[4]Assistant Professor
Mobile N: +919920694159
amanshivendra92@gmail.com
Department of Neurosurgery
King George's Medical University, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India
[4]Assistant Professor
Mobile No. +919127592168
chayanika.choudhury91@gmail.com
Department of Psychiatry
FAAMC College and Hospital, Barpeta, Assam, India

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ABSTRACT

Coagulopathy following neurotrauma, encompassing both traumatic brain injury and spinal cord injury, represents a significant clinical challenge, impacting patient outcomes and demanding prompt recognition and management. This complex condition, characterised by abnormalities in the coagulation cascade, fibrinolysis, and platelet function, can manifest as bleeding or thrombosis, further complicating the clinical picture. The precise mechanisms driving coagulopathy in the context of neurotrauma are not fully elucidated. Still, it is believed to stem from a combination of factors, including the release of tissue factors from injured brain tissue, activation of the inflammatory cascade, and dysfunction of the endothelial lining of blood vessels. Traumatic brain injury is a leading cause of mortality and morbidity, and the development of coagulopathy following TBI is associated with increased mortality in these patients. The pathophysiology of coagulopathy following traumatic brain injury is multifaceted and intricate, with the precise mechanisms remaining an area of intense investigation. One proposed mechanism involves releasing tissue factors from injured brain tissue into the circulation, triggering the coagulation cascade. This leads to the formation of thrombin, the enzyme responsible for converting fibrinogen to fibrin, ultimately resulting in clot formation. The extent of tissue injury appears to correlate with the severity of coagulopathy, suggesting a dose-dependent relationship between tissue factor release and coagulation activation. Dysregulation of the coagulation system after TBI can lead to both hemorrhagic and thrombotic complications, thereby worsening the initial brain injury and overall patient outcome. In addition to the release of tissue factors, activation of the inflammatory cascade following TBI can also contribute to the development of coagulopathy. The inflammatory response, characterised by the release of cytokines such as interleukin-1, interleukin-6, and tumour necrosis factor-alpha, can disrupt the delicate balance of the coagulation system. These inflammatory mediators can promote endothelial dysfunction, impairing the ability of blood vessels to regulate coagulation and increasing the risk of bleeding and thrombosis. As reflected by elevated levels of von Willebrand factor and thrombomodulin, endothelial damage may predict delayed brain injury. Disrupting the blood-brain barrier after TBI can lead to coagulation factors and inflammatory mediators entering the brain parenchyma, exacerbating the inflammatory response and contributing to secondary brain injury.

***Keywords**: Coagulopathy; traumatic brain injury; bleeding diathesis; antifibrinolytics; Tranexamic acid.*

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INTRODUCTION

Traumatic brain injury (TBI) is a significant public health concern globally, affecting millions of individuals each year. It results from an external mechanical force, leading to temporary or permanent impairments in cognitive, physical, and psychosocial functions. This medical condition ranges in severity from mild concussion to severe, life-threatening injuries. One of the critical and often overlooked complications of TBI is coagulopathy, a disorder characterised by the body's inability to form blood clots efficiently and control bleeding. Coagulopathy in TBI patients represents a complex interplay of factors that challenge both diagnosis and management, often leading to worsened outcomes and increased mortality.[1]

The study of coagulopathy in TBI is vital for several reasons. Firstly, understanding the pathophysiological mechanisms underlying this complication can guide more effective treatments and management strategies. The early detection and appropriate management of coagulopathy can significantly impact the clinical outcomes of TBI patients. Therefore, a comprehensive review of the current understanding of TBI-associated coagulopathy, its clinical implications, and management strategies is essential for improving patient care and outcomes.[2,3]

This review aims to consolidate the latest research and developments in the field, highlighting the pathophysiology, clinical presentation, diagnostic methods, and therapeutic approaches related to coagulopathy in TBI. By examining these aspects, we seek to thoroughly understand this complication, offering insights into more effective and personalised treatment strategies.

PATHOPHYSIOLOGY OF COAGULOPATHY IN TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) is a complex medical condition that not only affects neural tissue but also significantly impacts the body's coagulation system. This section explores the pathophysiological mechanisms behind coagulopathy in TBI, including the release of tissue factors, alterations in protein C, platelet hyperactivity, and the role of brain-derived microparticles.

TISSUE FACTOR RELEASE AND ITS IMPACT

One of the primary mechanisms initiating coagulopathy post-TBI is the release of tissue factors (TF). Tissue factors are proteins that play a crucial role in blood coagulation. When brain tissue is injured, cells release TF into the bloodstream, interacting with Factor VII and activating the extrinsic coagulation pathway. This cascade eventually leads to the formation of thrombin, a key enzyme in the blood clotting process. However, in the context of TBI, this TF release can be excessive, leading to an imbalance in the coagulation system.[4]

PROTEIN C ALTERATIONS IN TBI

Protein C is a natural anticoagulant and plays a significant role in regulating blood clot formation. In the setting of TBI, there is an alteration in the protein C pathway. When the endothelial cells that line blood vessels are damaged during TBI, they release thrombomodulin. Thrombomodulin binds to thrombin, changing thrombin's role from a pro-coagulant to an anticoagulant by activating protein C. Activated protein C then inhibits factors V and VIII, essential for clot formation. This disruption leads to an imbalance between pro-coagulant and anticoagulant forces in the body, contributing to coagulopathy.[5]

PLATELET HYPERACTIVITY AND DYSFUNCTION

Platelets play a critical role in haemostasis and wound healing. In TBI, there can be a state of platelet hyperactivity, where platelets become overly reactive. This hyperactivity is often coupled with dysfunction, as the platelets, though numerous, do not function properly. The exact cause of this hyperactivity and dysfunction is not fully understood but is believed to be related to the release of brain-derived substances into the bloodstream following injury, which then interact with

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platelets. This interaction can lead to a prothrombotic state, increasing the risk of clot formation in the body.[6]

ROLE OF BRAIN-DERIVED MICROPARTICLES

Recent research has highlighted the role of brain-derived microparticles in coagulopathy following TBI. These microparticles are small vesicles released from cells, particularly endothelial cells and neurones, after brain injury. They carry tissue factors and various proteins that can initiate and propagate the coagulation cascade. These microparticles contribute to a hypercoagulable state by providing additional surfaces for assembling coagulation factor complexes and promoting thrombin generation. This state increases the risk of thrombosis and can lead to a consumptive coagulopathy, where clotting factors are used up more quickly than they can be produced, leading to an increased risk of bleeding.[7] The pathophysiology of coagulopathy in TBI is multifaceted and involves a delicate balance between pro-coagulant and anticoagulant forces within the body. The release of tissue factors, alterations in protein C, platelet hyperactivity and dysfunction, and the role of brain-derived microparticles all contribute to the complexity of coagulopathy in TBI. Understanding these mechanisms is crucial for developing effective treatment strategies and improving patient outcomes with TBI.

CLINICAL MANIFESTATIONS AND DIAGNOSIS OF COAGULOPATHY

Coagulopathy in TBI patients presents a unique set of clinical challenges. The manifestation of coagulopathy can vary significantly, ranging from minor bleeding disorders to severe, life-threatening haemorrhage. Patients may exhibit symptoms such as prolonged bleeding from wounds, frequent epistaxis, bleeding gums, or, in more severe cases, intracranial haemorrhage, which can exacerbate the primary brain injury. The complexity of these manifestations necessitates a nuanced approach to diagnosis and treatment.

DIAGNOSTIC METHODS

Diagnosing coagulopathy in TBI is multifaceted and often requires clinical assessment and laboratory testing. Standard coagulation tests, like Prothrombin Time (PT) and Partial Thromboplastin Time (PTT), are routinely used but may not fully capture the dynamic changes in coagulation status post-TBI. Recent advancements have brought viscoelastic tests, such as thromboelastography (TEG) and rotational thromboelastometry (ROTEM), to the forefront. Unlike conventional coagulation tests that measure individual coagulation cascade components, these methods assess the overall haemostatic process, reflecting the interactions between coagulation factors, platelets, and fibrin. These assays employ a small blood sample to monitor the viscoelastic properties of the clot as it forms and breaks down, generating a characteristic tracing that provides information on various parameters such as the time to initial clot formation, the kinetics of clot growth, the final clot strength, and the degree of clot lysis.[8] By evaluating these parameters, clinicians can better understand the patient's haemostatic status and tailor treatment strategies accordingly. Thromboelastography and rotational thromboelastometry have emerged as valuable tools for guiding transfusion therapy, identifying hypercoagulable states, and optimising haemostatic management in various clinical settings. The utilisation of thromboelastography allows for a real-time evaluation of transfusion therapies to address haemostasis and is frequently employed in surgical settings, including cardiac, hepatic, and neurological procedures.[8]

MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR COAGULOPATHY IN TBI

Coagulopathy in traumatic brain injury (TBI) presents a significant challenge in patient management, requiring a balanced approach to treatment. The strategies involve managing bleeding risks while avoiding thrombotic complications, and they necessitate a deep

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understanding of the unique pathophysiology of coagulopathy in TBI.

CURRENT TREATMENT OPTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The cornerstone of managing TBI coagulopathy involves administering blood products, including fresh frozen plasma, platelets, and cryoprecipitate. These are often used to correct identified deficiencies in clotting factors or platelets. However, using blood products comes with inherent risks, such as transfusion reactions, volume overload, and the potential for exacerbating thrombosis. Another critical aspect of management is the control of intracranial pressure (ICP) and maintenance of cerebral perfusion, which can be compromised due to hemorrhagic events. Measures such as mannitol or hypertonic saline are commonly used but can potentially impact coagulation and fluid balance. Antifibrinolytic agents are also used in certain cases to prevent the breakdown of blood clots. However, their use must be carefully weighed against the risk of thrombosis. The balance between treating coagulopathy and preventing secondary brain injury due to haemorrhage or ischaemia underscores the complexity of treatment in TBI patients.[9]

EFFECTIVENESS OF TRANEXAMIC ACID

Tranexamic acid (TXA), an antifibrinolytic agent, has been studied for its effectiveness in TBI, particularly in mild to moderate cases. TXA works by inhibiting the conversion of plasminogen to plasmin, thereby reducing fibrinolysis and stabilising clots. Recent studies, including one by Nakae et al. (2022), have shown that TXA can be beneficial in reducing haemorrhage progression in TBI patients when administered early. However, its use must be carefully considered, as there are concerns about the potential increase in thrombotic events. The timing, dosage, and patient selection are crucial factors in determining the effectiveness and safety of TXA in the context of TBI.[9]

NEED FOR INDIVIDUALISED TREATMENT APPROACHES

The variability in the TBI's presentation and progression of coagulopathy underscores the need for individualised treatment approaches. Factors such as the severity of the brain injury, the presence of other injuries, patient history, and the specific coagulation abnormalities identified must all be considered when developing a treatment plan. Viscoelastic testing, as previously discussed, can aid in tailoring treatments to the patient's specific needs. This approach allows for more targeted therapy, potentially reducing the risks associated with over-transfusion or under-treatment of coagulopathy. In conclusion, managing coagulopathy in TBI is a dynamic process that requires a multidisciplinary approach and a deep understanding of the complex interplay between brain injury, coagulation, and systemic responses. Continued research and development of targeted therapies are essential for improving outcomes in this challenging patient population.

PROGNOSTIC IMPLICATIONS

TBI is a devastating event with significant morbidity and mortality. Beyond the primary mechanical damage to the brain, various secondary pathophysiological processes can worsen the outcome. Among these, coagulopathy, a dysfunctional blood clotting system, emerges as a crucial factor influencing prognosis and long-term consequences in TBI patients. Coagulopathy in TBI encompasses a complex interplay between abnormal activation of coagulation, fibrinolysis, and inflammation. This intricate cascade results in impaired blood flow, hampered tissue oxygenation, and secondary haemorrhage, all of which contribute to neuronal injury and exacerbate primary brain damage.[10]

IMPACT ON MORTALITY

In-hospital mortality remains a significant concern in TBI patients, and coagulopathy plays a direct role in this scenario. Studies have consistently demonstrated a strong association

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between coagulopathy and increased mortality rates. Chhabra et al. (2013) reported that patients with TBI who developed coagulopathy had a significantly higher mortality rate (35%) compared to those without coagulopathy (7.4%).[11] This association is likely because of coagulopathy on brain tissue, leading to further damage and complications like intracranial haemorrhage.

SEVERITY OF HEAD INJURY AS A RISK FACTOR

The initial head injury's severity significantly influences coagulopathy's development and severity. More severe TBI, characterised by lower Glasgow Coma Scale (GCS) scores, often translates to greater coagulopathy.[12] This is because the extent of tissue damage and inflammation triggered by the initial impact directly promotes the activation of pro-coagulant pathways and disrupts the normal clotting mechanisms. For instance, Chhabra et al. (2013) found that patients with GCS scores ≤ 8 had a much higher coagulopathy prevalence than those with higher scores.[11] This underlines the importance of immediate and aggressive management of severe TBI to prevent the cascading effects of coagulopathy on mortality and morbidity.

BEYOND MORTALITY: FUNCTIONAL OUTCOMES AND LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES

The impact of coagulopathy extends beyond in-hospital mortality, affecting functional outcomes and long-term quality of life in TBI survivors. Studies suggest that patients with coagulopathy are at increased risk for poorer functional outcomes at discharge and during long-term follow-up. This is likely due to the persistent microvascular dysfunction and impaired blood flow to brain tissue caused by coagulopathy, which can hinder neuronal recovery and repair processes. Additionally, the association of coagulopathy with secondary complications like infections further contributes to poor long-term outcomes.[13,14]

TARGETING COAGULOPATHY FOR IMPROVED PROGNOSIS:

Understanding how coagulopathy influences TBI prognosis is crucial for developing targeted therapeutic interventions. Research efforts are currently focused on identifying specific biomarkers of coagulopathy in TBI and exploring potential therapeutic options to modulate the coagulation cascade and prevent its detrimental effects. Antithrombin III supplementation, recombinant activated protein C, and targeted haemostatic agents are some of the promising avenues being investigated.[15] Coagulopathy is a critical prognostic factor in TBI, significantly impacting in-hospital mortality, functional outcomes, and long-term quality of life. The severity of head injury acts as a significant risk factor for developing coagulopathy. Continued research into the mechanisms linking coagulopathy to TBI outcomes and developing targeted therapeutic strategies holds immense potential for improving prognosis and long-term well-being in TBI patients.

CONCLUSION

TBI is a devastating event with significant morbidity and mortality. Coagulopathy, a dysfunctional blood clotting system, is a common complication of TBI that worsens outcomes and increases the risk of death. The presence and severity of coagulopathy are directly related to the severity of the head injury. Patients with more severe TBI are more likely to develop coagulopathy and have a higher mortality rate. Coagulopathy also affects functional outcomes and long-term quality of life in TBI survivors. Patients with coagulopathy are at increased risk for poorer functional outcomes at discharge and during long-term follow-up. Understanding how coagulopathy influences TBI prognosis is crucial for developing targeted therapeutic interventions. Research efforts are currently focused on identifying specific biomarkers of coagulopathy in TBI and exploring potential

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therapeutic options to modulate the coagulation cascade and prevent its detrimental effects. Antithrombin III supplementation, recombinant activated protein C, and targeted haemostatic agents are some of the promising avenues being investigated.

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