Thoracic Aortic Diseases
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With 242 Figures, 72 in Color and 35 Tables
When, more than 30 years ago, I started my residency in cardiovascular surgery, lesions of the descending thoracic aorta were considered a big surgical challenge.

We were dealing with acute De Bakey type III dissections, now called Shumway type B, and did not really know at that time whether we should treat them surgically or medically. Post-operative morbidity and mortality were so important that in the end we decided to treat them medically when these dissections were free of complications.

Certainly, some of the patients could die from a rupture of the aorta, but overall the mortality was much lower than with surgery. This attitude still prevails today.

There were also acute traumatic ruptures of the distal aortic arch, and in this case emergency surgical treatment was the rule. After cross-clamping the thoracic aorta, the lesion was repaired as fast as possible. Also in these cases mortality was high, and morbidity was significant, especially regarding paraplegia.

Then we started using the Gott shunt. This shunt allowed perfusion of the distal aorta during clamping without the need for severe anticoagulation and thus proved useful in multiple-trauma patients. Nevertheless, the Gott shunt was quite difficult to use, and was not really reliable. However, it represented some progress.

Later we got to use “active” shunts, such as partial extracorporeal circulation systems left-left, or right-left with centrifuge pumps and “heparin-like” circuits, which did allow very low anticoagulation in multiple-trauma patients, and the results improved both with regard to mortality and morbidity, as fewer patients were dying and less paraplegia was noted, but this neurologic complication was still a major factor.

In the end, surgery of thoracic aortic aneurysms was providing the best results at that time, but mortality was still substantial, as was morbidity. Five to 10% of patients were dying post-operatively.

Surgeons like De Bakey, Cooley, Crawford, Johnson, Kouchoukos, and others made major contributions in improving surgical technique.

Since then, much progress has been made regarding indications, extra-corporeal circulation with the use of deep hypothermia and circulatory arrest, anaesthesia, reanimation, and surgical techniques. We have also gained a better understanding of anatomy and physiology of spinal cord vascularisation. Presently, surgery of the descending thoracic aorta is not the “scary” event it used to be 30 years ago, but it still remains challenging.

We should not forget that some of the progress made in the surgical management of thoracic aortic aneurysms is due to improvements achieved in radiological imaging, which nowadays has become very reliable and is in practice devoid of risks.

In the early 1990s, an article by Parodi et al. entitled “Transfemoral intraluminal graft implantation for abdominal aortic aneurysms” heralded the development parallel to surgery of a new treatment strategy for aortic lesions, which could be repaired from “inside the lumen”.

Most major surgeons did not really pay attention to this publication, until Dake, a radiologist from Stanford University, demonstrated that it was possible to treat most of the lesions of the descending thoracic aorta by the use of endovascular stent grafts, with little trauma, short hospital stay, little paraplegia, and a very low mortality rate.

Since then, close collaboration between industry and medicine has brought many improvements in the development of these stent grafts and has allowed the vast majority of lesions of the descending thoracic aorta to be treated by this technique. Furthermore, this technique can now be used in combination with a simple surgical procedure to repair even lesions of the aortic arch, and, in our view, this is not yet the end.

Traumatic ruptures and acute type B dissections can now be treated in the same way. Most aneurysms are also manageable by this strategy if certain anatomic prerequisites are fulfilled. And this is not to mention ulcers and their complications, which have become very easy to treat. Problems may arise often now only from certain aneurysms due to chronic dissections, but even in these cases is one not in his or her right to try first the endoluminal approach, and, if this fails, to entrust the patient to the surgeon?
In fact, endoluminal stent grafting really is a revolution in therapy and, like every revolution, it has been met with some distrust or even hostility by those in relevant positions, the surgeons.

For them, every endoleak was a failure. What was to become of the grafts? One cannot, however, treat all lesions by these means! They were leaning on the limitations of the method while forgetting that it killed a lot fewer patients than surgery and that the number of paraplegias was infinitesimal.

Furthermore, neither the technological progress of aortic stent grafts nor the skills of the people implanting them have reached their conclusion.

Hence, there are three major issues in this field:

1. There is the issue of the restrictions of the access to the aorta owing to the state of the femoro-iliac axis, an issue which will fade away (but not disappear completely) as technological progress is achieved.

2. There is the issue of the balance of the actions of surgeons and radiologists.
   (a) In our view, it is crucial that indications are established jointly.
   (b) Should the procedure be performed in a surgical operating room or in a radiology unit equipped for surgery? The procedure requires sophisticated radiological equipment which is usually unavailable in surgical operating rooms. If surgeons argue that it is impossible to operate on an aortic rupture in a radiology unit, they are right. But what are the figures for aortic ruptures? In Toulouse, in our institution, we have seen none in 150 consecutive cases, and the only problems we had arose from the femoro-iliac axis. Migration of the stent graft to another part of the aorta always leaves enough time to take the patient to the surgical operating room. In view of this, does the radiological equipment usually available in surgical operating rooms provide the necessary accuracy? We believe it does not. In fact, endoluminal stent grafting implies little surgery and there are nearly no complications which would require heavy-duty surgical equipment, while the interventional radiology technique is dependent upon the accuracy provided by sophisticated paraphernalia. So, in our view, the procedure should therefore be performed in a radiology unit equipped like an operating room, and it should be accomplished by an interdisciplinary medical and nursing staff including anaesthesiologists, surgeons, and radiologists.

3. There is the issue of who should operate? The radiologist, for the time being, needs the surgeon's help. The surgeon could do everything on his or her own! But we just proved that the procedure should be performed in a radiological unit! So why not a symbiosis between radiologists and surgeons, with a distribution of tasks and responsibilities, especially in terms of complications?

What needs to be avoided by every means is the recruitment of patients directly by radiologists, who would, once they did not need the surgeon's help anymore (and this is likely to happen soon for the femoral approach), establish the indication and perform the procedure on their own, calling the surgeon only if a complication arises. It would be equally hazardous for the surgeon to establish the indication alone and to perform the procedure by himself or herself in an operating room equipped only with austere mobile radiology gear. Neither of these two attitudes would benefit the patient and one must not forget that it is his or her interest that should always be at the heart of medical action.

Thus, our patients will be permitted to gain from the progress achieved in the field of cardiovascular surgery when necessary and from the accomplishments of interventional radiology the majority of the time.
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</tbody>
</table>
List of Contributors

Kenichi Abe
Department of Cardiology
Kokura Memorial Hospital
Kitakyushu
Japan

Ani Anyanwu
Department of Cardiothoracic Surgery
Mount Sinai Medical Center
1190 Fifth Avenue, Box 1028
New York, NY 10029
USA

Paloma Aragoncillo
Departamento de Anatomía Patológica
Hospital Universitario de San Carlos
Madrid
Spain

John H. Artrip
The Children’s Hospital Heart Institute
1056 East 19th Avenue, B200
Denver, CO 80218-1088
USA

Philippe Asseman
Cardiac Intensive Care Unit
Hôpital Cardiologique – CHRU de Lille
Bd du Professeur Leclerc
59037 Lille CEDEX
France

Jean-Michel Bartoli
Department of Radiology
CHU La Timpe
264 rue Saint Pierre
13385 Marseille CEDEX 5
France

Jean-Paul Beregi
Service de Radiologie et d’Imagerie Cardio-vasculaire,
Hôpital Cardiologique – CHRU de Lille
Bd du Professeur Leclerc
59037 Lille CEDEX
France

Jean Philippe Bolduc
Department of Radiology
Rangueil University Hospital
1 av J. Poulhes – TSA 50032
31059 Toulouse CEDEX 9
France

Louis Boyer
Service de Radiologie
CHU Montpied, BP 69
63003 Clermont-Ferrand
France

Ana Bustos
Departamento de Radiología
Hospital Universitario de San Carlos
Madrid
Spain

Guillaume Canvet
Department of Radiology
Rangueil University Hospital
1 av J. Poulhes – TSA 50032
31059 Toulouse CEDEX 9
France

Doron Carmi
Department of Cardiovascular Surgery
Centre Hospitalier et Universitaire d’Amiens
Hospital Sud
80054 Amiens CEDEX 10
France
Philippe Cluzel
Radiology Department
Groupe Hospitalier Pitié-Salpêtrière
47–83 bd de l’Hôpital
75013 Paris
France

Alain Cerne
Department of Cardiovascular Surgery
Rangueil University Hospital
1 av J. Poulhes – TSA 50032
31059 Toulouse CEDEX 9
France

C. Cron
Department of Cardiovascular Surgery
University Hospital Rangueil
01 av J Poulhes
31403 Toulouse
France

Michael D. Dake
University of Virginia Health System
Charlottesville, VA 22908-0170
USA

Camille Dambrin
Department of Cardiovascular Surgery
Rangueil University Hospital
1 av J. Poulhes – TSA 50032
31059 Toulouse CEDEX 9
France

Bertrand De Latour
Cardiovascular and Thoracic Surgery Department
University Hospital Center of Rennes
Ponchaillou Hospital
Rue Henri Le Guillou
35033 Rennes CEDEX 9
France

Gabriel Delorme
Cardiology Department
Hôpital Ambroise Paré
9 av Charles de Gaulle
92100 Boulogne Billancourt
France

Karl Dossche
St. Antonius Hospital
Department of Cardiothoracic Surgery
Koekoeklaan 1
3435 CM Nieuwegein
The Netherlands

Chris Elkins
Departments of Mechanical Engineering and Radiology
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305
USA

Anthony L. Estrera
Department of Cardiothoracic and Vascular Surgery
The University of Texas at Houston Medical School
6410 Fannin, Suite 450, CV Surgery
Houston, TX 77030
USA

Artur Evangelista
Department of Cardiac Imaging
Cardiology Department
Hospital Universitari Vall d’Hebron
Barcelona
Spain

Rosella Fattori
Cardiovascular Unit
Department of Radiology
S. Orsola University Hospital
Bologna
Italy

Jeffrey A. Feinstein
Pediatrics
Division of Pediatric Cardiology
Associate Director
Pediatric and Congenital Cardiac Catheterization
Lucile Packard Children’s Hospital
Stanford University Medical Center
750 Welch Road, Suite 305
Palo Alto, CA 94304
USA

Gerard Fournial
Department of Cardiovascular Surgery
CHU Rangueil
Toulouse
France

Joaquin Ferreirós
Departamento de Radiología
Hospital Universitario de San Carlos
Madrid
Spain

Virginia Gaxotte
Service de Radiologie et d’Imagerie Cardio-vasculaire
Hôpital Cardiologique – CHRU de Lille
Bd du Professeur Leclerc
59037 Lille CEDEX
France
Betti Giusti
Department of Medical and Surgical Critical Care
Thrombosis Centre
and Centre for the Study at Molecular
and Clinical Level of Chronic,
Degenerative and Neoplastic Diseases
to Develop Novel Therapies (DENOTHE)
University of Florence
Viale Morgagni 85
50134 Florence
Italy

Teresa González-Alujas
Echocardiography
Cardiology Department
Hospital Universitari Vall d’Hebron
Barcelona
Spain

Randall Griepp
Department of Cardiothoracic Surgery
Mount Sinai Medical Center
1190 Fifth Avenue, Box 1028
New York, NY 10029
USA

Jean Philippe Guibaud
Department of Cardiovascular
and Paediatric Cardiac Surgery
Bordeaux Heart University Hospital
Avenue de Magellan
33604 Pessac
France

Jean-François Heautot
Radiology and Medical Imaging Department
University Hospital Center of Rennes
Ponchaillou Hospital
Rue Henri Le Guillou
35033 Rennes CEDEX 9
France

Tadanori Hirano
Department of Radiology
Matsukasa Central General Hospital
102 Kawai, Matsukasa
Mie 515-8566
Japan

Hiroaki Hosokawa
Department of Clinical Research
National Hospital Organization
Toyohashi Hospital
Aichi
Japan

Tam T.T. Huynh
Department of Cardiothoracic and Vascular Surgery
The University of Texas at Houston Medical School
6410 Fannin, Suite 450, CV Surgery
Houston, TX 77030
USA

Kanji Inoue
PTMC Institute
39-1 Sakurai-Cho, Kamigamo
Kita-Ku, Kyoto 603-8054
Japan and
Clinical Department of Cardiovascular Surgery
Faculty of Medicine
Kyoto University
Shimabara Hospital
7-4 Kosaka-Cho, Shimokyo-Ku
Kyoto, 600-8821
Japan

Krassi Ivancev
Endovascular Center
Malmö University Hospital
20502 Malmö
Sweden

Michael J. Jacobs
Department of Surgery
University Hospital Maastricht
P.O. Box 5800
6202 AZ Maastricht
The Netherlands

Patrick Jégo
Internal Medicine Unit
Hôpital Sud
16 boulevard de Bulgarie
35203 Rennes
France

Francis Joffre
Department of Radiology
Rangueil University Hospital
1 av J. Poulhes – TSA 50032
31059 Toulouse CEDEX 9
France

Guillaume Jondeau
Consultation Multidisciplinaire Marfan
Hôpital Ambroise Paré
9 Av Charles de Gaulle
92100 Boulogne Billancourt
France
Cyril Kakon
Cardiovascular and Thoracic Surgery Department
University Hospital Center of Rennes
Pontchaillou Hospital
Rue Henri Le Guillou
35033 Rennes CEDEX 9
France

Matthias Karck
Division of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery
Hannover Medical School
Carl-Neuberg-Str. 1
30625 Hannover
Germany

Noriyuki Kato
Department of Radiology
Mie University Hospital
2-174 Edobashi, Tsu
Mie 514-8507
Japan

Nawid Khaladj
Division of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery
Hannover Medical School
Carl-Neuberg-Str. 1
30625 Hannover
Germany

Takeshi Kimura
Department of Cardiovascular Medicine
Graduate School of Medicine
Kyoto University
and Director
Division of Clinical Cardiology
Kyoto University Hospital
Kyoto
Japan

Bansi Koul
Department of Cardiothoracic Surgery
University Hospital of Lund
22185 Lund
Sweden

Louis Labrousse
Department of Cardiac and Vascular Surgery
Hôpital Haut-Lévêque
Bordeaux University Hospital
33604 Pessac CEDEX
France

Francois G. Lacour-Gayet
Pediatric Cardiac Surgery
The Children's Hospital Heart Institute
1056 East 19th Avenue, B200
Denver, CO 80218-1088
USA

John F. LaDisa Jr.
Pediatrics
Division of Cardiology
Stanford University Medical Center
750 Welch Road, Suite 305
Palo Alto, CA 94304
USA

Thierry Langanay
Cardiovascular and Thoracic Surgery Department
University Hospital Center of Rennes
Pontchaillou Hospital
Rue Henri Le Guillou
35033 Rennes CEDEX 9
France

Do Yun Lee
Department of Diagnostic Radiology
Yonsei University College of Medicine
134 Shinchon-dong
Seodaemun-gu
Seoul 120-752
Korea

Alain Leguerrier
Cardiovascular and Thoracic Surgery Department
University Hospital Center of Rennes
Pontchaillou Hospital
Rue Henri Le Guillou
35033 Rennes CEDEX 9
France

B. Leobon
Department of Cardiovascular Surgery
University Hospital Rangueil
01 av J Poulhes
31403 Toulouse
France

Pascal Leprince
CT Surgery Department
Groupe Hospitalier Pitié-Salpêtrière
47–83 bd de l'Hôpital
75013 Paris
France
Christophe Lions
Service de Radiologie et d’Imagerie Cardio-vasculaire
Hôpital Cardiologique – CHRU de Lille
Bd du Professeur Leclerc
59037 Lille CEDEX
France

Bertrand Marcheix
Department of Cardiovascular Surgery
Rangueil University Hospital
1 av J. Poulhes – TSA 50032
31059 Toulouse CEDEX 9
France

Pierre Massabauau
Department of Cardiology
Rangueil University Hospital
1 av J. Poulhes – TSA 50032
31059 Toulouse CEDEX 9
France

Geneviève Meites
Département d’Anesthésie Réanimation
Centre Hospitalier Universitaire
31059 Toulouse
France

Charles C. Miller III
Center for Clinical Research
and Evidence-Based Medicine
Center for Biotechnology
Department of Cardiothoracic and Vascular Surgery
The University of Texas at Houston Medical School
6410 Fannin, Suite 450, CV Surgery
Houston, TX 77030
USA

Olivier Milleron
Cardiology Department
Hôpital Ambroise Paré
9 av Charles de Gaulle
92100 Boulogne Billancourt
France

R. Scott Mitchell
Department of Cardiothoracic Surgery
Stanford University School of Medicine
300 Pasteur Drive
Stanford, CA 94305
USA

Ziad Negaiwi
Service de Radiologie et d’Imagerie Cardio-vasculaire
Hôpital Cardiologique – CHRU de Lille
Bd du Professeur Leclerc
59037 Lille CEDEX
France

Christoph A. Nienaber
Division of Cardiology
University Hospital Rostock
Rostock School of Medicine
Ernst-Heydemann-Str. 6
18057 Rostock
Germany

Philippe Otal
Department of Radiology
Rangueil University Hospital
1 av J. Poulhes – TSA 50032
31059 Toulouse CEDEX 9
France

Davide Pacini
Department of Cardiac Surgery
S. Orsola University Hospital
Bologna
Italy

Alain Pavie
CT Surgery Department
Groupe Hospitalier Pitié-Salpêtrière
47–83 bd de l’Hôpital
75013 Paris
France

Oliver Pellerin
Department of Cardiovascular
and Interventional Radiology
Hôpital Européen Georges Pompidou
75015 Paris
France

Guglielmina Pepe
Department of Medical
and Surgical Critical Care
Thrombosis Centre
and Centre for the Study at Molecular
and Clinical Level of Chronic,
Degenerative and Neoplastic Diseases
to Develop Novel Therapies (DENOTHE)
University of Florence
Viale Morgagni 85
50134 Florence
Italy

Bora Peynircioğlu
Section of Vascular/Interventional Radiology
Department of Radiology
School of Medicine
Hacettepe University
Ankara
Turkey
Eyal E. Porat  
Department of Cardiothoracic and Vascular Surgery  
The University of Texas at Houston Medical School  
6410 Fannin, Suite 450, CV Surgery  
Houston, TX 77030  
USA

Maria Cristina Porciani  
Department of Medical and Surgical Critical Care  
University of Florence  
Viale Morgagni 85  
50134 Florence  
Italy

Alain Prat  
Cardiac and Vascular Surgery Unit  
Hôpital Cardiologique – CHRU de Lille  
Bd du Professeur Leclerc  
59037 Lille CEDEX  
France

Matthieu Revest  
Internal Medicine Unit  
Hôpital Sud  
16 Boulevard de Bulgarie  
35203 Rennes  
France

Xavier Roques  
Department of Cardiovascular and Paediatric Cardiac Surgery  
Bordeaux Heart University Hospital  
Avenue de Magellan  
33604 Pessac  
France

Hervé Rousseau  
Department of Radiology  
Rangueil University Hospital  
1 av J. Poulhes – TSA 50032  
31059 Toulouse CEDEX 9  
France

Hazim J. Safi  
Department of Cardiothoracic and Vascular Surgery  
The University of Texas at Houston Medical School  
6410 Fannin, Suite 450, CV Surgery  
Houston, TX 77030  
USA

José Alberto San Román  
ICICOR – Instituto de las Ciencias del Corazón  
Hospital Universitario de Valladolid  
Valladolid  
Spain

Marc Sapoval  
Faculté de Médecine René Descartes Paris 5  
Department of Cardiovascular and Interventional Radiology  
Hôpital Européen Georges Pompidou  
75015 Paris  
France

Hans-Joachim Schäfers  
Department of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery  
Universitätsklinikum des Saarlandes  
Korlebergerstr. 1  
66424 Homburg/Saar  
Germany

Marc Schepens  
St. Antonius Hospital  
Department of Cardiothoracic Surgery  
Koekoekelaan 1  
3435 CM Nieuwegein  
The Netherlands

Michel Sellin  
Service d’Anesthésie Réanimation 2  
University Hospital Center of Rennes  
Pontchaillou Hospital  
Rue Henri Le Guillou  
35033 Rennes CEDEX 9  
France

Takatsugu Shimono  
Department of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery  
Mie University Hospital  
2-174 Edobashi, Tsu  
Mie 514-8507  
Japan

David Spielvogel  
New York Medical College  
Valhalla, NY 10595  
USA

Charles A. Taylor  
Mechanical Engineering  
Bioengineering, Surgery, Pediatrics (by courtesy)  
& Radiology (by courtesy)  
Stanford University Medical Center  
750 Welch Road, Suite 305  
Palo Alto, CA 94304  
USA

Frédéric Thony  
Service Central de Radiologie et Imagerie Médicale  
CHU – Scrim  
BP 217, 38043 Grenoble 9  
France