

Pathway-Specific Aggregate Biomarker Risk Score Is Associated With Burden of Coronary Artery Disease and Predicts Near-Term Risk of Myocardial Infarction and Death

Nima Ghasemzadeh, MD; Salim S. Hayek, MD; Yi-An Ko, PhD; Danny J. Eapen, MD; Riyaz S. Patel, MD; Pankaj Manocha, MD; Hatem Al Kasseem, MD; Mohamed Khayata, MD; Emir Veledar, PhD; Dimitrios Kremastinos, MD, PhD; Christian W. Thorball, BS; Tomasz Pielak, BS; Sergey Sikora, PhD; A. Maziar Zafari, MD, PhD; Stamatios Lerakis, MD; Laurence Sperling, MD; Viola Vaccarino, MD, PhD; Stephen E. Epstein, MD; Arshed A. Quyyumi, MD

Background—Inflammation, coagulation, and cell stress contribute to atherosclerosis and its adverse events. A biomarker risk score (BRS) based on the circulating levels of biomarkers C-reactive protein, fibrin degradation products, and heat shock protein-70 representing these 3 pathways was a strong predictor of future outcomes. We investigated whether soluble urokinase plasminogen activator receptor (suPAR), a marker of immune activation, is predictive of outcomes independent of the aforementioned markers and whether its addition to a 3-BRS improves risk reclassification.

Methods and Results—C-reactive protein, fibrin degradation product, heat shock protein-70, and suPAR were measured in 3278 patients undergoing coronary angiography. The BRS was calculated by counting the number of biomarkers above a cutoff determined using the Youden's index. Survival analyses were performed using models adjusted for traditional risk factors. A high suPAR level ≥ 3.5 ng/mL was associated with all-cause death and myocardial infarction (hazard ratio, 1.83; 95% confidence interval, 1.43–2.35) after adjustment for risk factors, C-reactive protein, fibrin degradation product, and heat shock protein-70. Addition of suPAR to the 3-BRS significantly improved the C statistic, integrated discrimination improvement, and net reclassification index for the primary outcome. A BRS of 1, 2, 3, or 4 was associated with a 1.81-, 2.59-, 6.17-, and 8.80-fold increase, respectively, in the risk of death and myocardial infarction. The 4-BRS was also associated with severity of coronary artery disease and composite end points.

Conclusions—SuPAR is independently predictive of adverse outcomes, and its addition to a 3-BRS comprising C-reactive protein, fibrin degradation product, and heat shock protein-70 improved risk reclassification. The clinical utility of using a 4-BRS for risk prediction and management of patients with coronary artery disease warrants further study. (*Circ Cardiovasc Qual Outcomes*. 2017;10:e001493. DOI: 10.1161/CIRCOUTCOMES.115.001493.)

Key Words: biomarker ■ cardiovascular outcomes ■ coronary artery disease ■ prognosis ■ risk score

Coronary artery disease (CAD) continues to be the leading cause of mortality worldwide.¹ The mechanisms involved in the development of atherosclerosis and subsequent plaque rupture that precipitate acute coronary events and death are complex and involve several pathways, including key contributions of inflammation, immune dysregulation, stress, and thrombosis.² Clinical tools, such as the Framingham risk score, predict long-term risk of outcomes in the healthy population,^{3,4} but fail to reliably prognosticate risk of adverse outcomes in patients with established CAD.⁵

We recently identified a simple noninvasive risk score based on the concept that the greater the number of pathways related to plaque rupture that are activated in a given patient, the greater the risk of actual plaque rupture.⁶ This aggregate biomarker strategy for risk prediction was tested using the biomarkers C-reactive protein (CRP), representing inflammation, fibrin degradation products (FDP), representing the coagulation pathway, and heat shock protein-70 (HSP-70), representing cell stress. The biomarker risk score (BRS) strategy was highly successful in predicting risk of near-term myocardial

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From the Department of Medicine, Division of Cardiology, Emory University School of Medicine, Atlanta, GA (N.G., S.S.H., D.J.E., R.S.P., P.M., H.A.K., M.K., E.V., A.M.Z., S.L., L.S., V.V., A.A.Q.); Department of Biostatistics and Bioinformatics, Emory University, Atlanta, GA (Y.-A.K.); Institute of Cardiovascular Science, University College London, United Kingdom (R.S.P.); Division of Cardiology, Atlanta VA Medical Center, GA (A.M.Z.); Department of Biostatistics, Florida International University, Miami (E.V.); Department of Cardiology, University of Athens School of Medicine, Greece (D.K.); Clinical Research Centre, Copenhagen University Hospital, Denmark (C.W.T., T.P.); Stemmedica Cell Technologies, Inc., San Diego, CA (S.S.); Department of Epidemiology, Emory University, Atlanta, GA (V.V.); and MedStar Heart and Vascular Institute, MedStar Washington Hospital Center, Washington, DC (S.E.E.).

Correspondence to Arshed A. Quyyumi, MD, Emory Clinical Cardiovascular Research Institute, 1462 Clifton Rd, NE Suite 507, Atlanta GA 30322. E-mail aquyyum@emory.edu

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WHAT IS KNOWN

- A 3-biomarker risk score incorporating levels of C-reactive protein, fibrin degradation products, and heat shock protein-70 representing pathways of inflammation, hypercoagulable state, and cellular stress was previously shown to significantly improve risk prediction in patients with or at high risk of cardiovascular disease.
- Soluble urokinase plasminogen activator receptor, thought to be a marker of immune activation, is strongly predictive of outcomes in various populations

WHAT THE STUDY ADDS

- Soluble urokinase plasminogen activator receptor is associated with worse outcomes independently of traditional risk factors, as well as C-reactive protein, fibrin degradation products, and heat shock protein-70.
- Addition of soluble urokinase plasminogen activator receptor to a biomarker risk score incorporating the aforementioned biomarkers significantly improved risk prediction.
- The clinical utility of a multimarker approach to risk prediction warrants investigation.

infarction (MI) and death in patients with suspected or established CAD.⁶

Soluble urokinase plasminogen activator receptor (suPAR) is a marker of immune activation and inflammation that seems to orchestrate cellular adhesion, migration, and proliferation during development of the atherosclerotic plaque.⁷ Higher circulating levels of suPAR are associated with incident cardiovascular disease (CVD) in the healthy population,^{8,9} and we and others have found that it also predicts incident CVD events and chronic kidney disease in subjects with CAD.^{10–12}

The purpose of the present investigation is to determine (1) whether suPAR levels are associated with outcomes independent of the aforementioned markers of inflammation (CRP), hypercoagulable state (FDP), and cellular stress (HSP-70), and (2) whether addition of suPAR to the 3-BRS improves prediction of future adverse events.

Methods

Study Population

Subjects were recruited as a part of the Emory Cardiovascular Biobank and consisted of 3278 patients undergoing left heart catheterization for diagnosis of suspected CAD in Emory Healthcare hospitals between 2003 and 2009. Subjects with heart transplantation, severe valvular heart disease, congenital heart disease, severe anemia, recent blood transfusion, myocarditis, active inflammatory diseases, and cancer were excluded. Demographics, medical, smoking status, and risk factor prevalence were documented as previously described.⁶ Smoking was classified as nonsmoker or current smoker. Subjects were noted to have hypertension or dyslipidemia if they had a documented history or were on treatment. Acute MI at enrollment was defined using universal criteria.¹³ Briefly, MI was diagnosed with detection of a rise of cardiac troponin with either ischemic symptoms, dynamic EKG changes, or identification of an intracoronary

thrombus by angiography. The study was approved by the Emory University Institutional Review Board. All subjects provided written informed consent.

Outcomes and Follow-Up

To minimize physician-imposed bias, we selected a composite end point consisting of hard outcomes of ischemic heart disease, including all-cause death and nonfatal MI. Follow-up was conducted between 1 and 5 years for determination of the primary composite end point of all-cause death and nonfatal MI and the secondary end points of cardiovascular death, all-cause death/MI/revascularization, and all-cause death/MI/stroke. Follow-up data were collected by personnel blinded to the biomarker data through telephone interview, chart review, and query of the Social Security Death Index and State records. Two independent cardiologists, both blinded to the clinical and biomarker data, adjudicated the cause of death. Cardiovascular death was defined as death attributable to an ischemic cardiovascular cause (ie, fatal MI, stroke, or peripheral arterial disease) or sudden death because of an unknown but presumed cardiovascular cause in high-risk patients. Medical records were accessed to validate all self-reported events, including MI.¹³

Identification of CAD and Severity Scoring

Luminal narrowing of coronary arteries were quantified using a modified American Heart Association/American College of Cardiology classification of the coronaries.¹⁴ Patients were classified as having nonsignificant CAD (visible plaque resulting in <50% luminal stenosis) or significant CAD (at least 1 major epicardial vessel with ≥50% stenosis). Normal coronaries were defined as those with no visual stenosis of major epicardial arteries and smooth appearance during angiography and without history of prior coronary artery bypass graft surgery or angioplasty. Quantitative angiographic scoring was performed using the Gensini score that quantifies CAD severity by a nonlinear points system for degree of luminal narrowing and has been shown to have prognostic significance.^{15,16}

Sample Collection

Fasting arterial blood samples for serum and plasma were drawn before angiography and stored at –80°C (mean, 4.9 years). Details of the biomarker assays have been previously described.^{6,11} Briefly, serum CRP and FDP measurements were determined using a sandwich immunoassay by FirstMark, Inc (San Diego, CA). Serum HSP-70 was measured with a sandwich enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (R&D Systems, Minneapolis, MN) and optimized by FirstMark. Plasma suPAR levels were measured using commercially available kits (suPARnostic kit; Virogates, Copenhagen, Denmark). Minimum detectable CRP, FDP, HSP-70, and suPAR were 0.1 mg/L, 0.06 μg/mL, 0.313 ng/mL, and 0.1 ng/mL, respectively.

Statistical Analyses

Continuous variables are presented as mean (±SD) or median (interquartile range) and categorical variables as proportions (%). The student's *t* test and χ^2 tests were used when appropriate. Mann–Whitney U or Kruskal–Wallis nonparametric tests were performed on non-normally distributed variables. The relationship between biomarkers and outcomes was determined using the Cox proportional hazards regression in unadjusted models and in models adjusted for established risk factors that include clinically relevant covariates for CVD outcomes (age, sex, race, history of hypertension, diabetes mellitus, dyslipidemia, previous MI, acute MI at presentation, estimated glomerular filtration rate, Gensini score, body mass index, left ventricular ejection fraction, history of coronary artery bypass graft, smoking status, and the use of aspirin, clopidogrel, and statins). Fine and Gray's subdistribution hazard model was used to analyze cardiovascular death outcome, considering noncardiovascular death as the competing risk event.

The best discriminatory cutoff for each biomarker in association with the death/MI outcome was determined using the Youden's index

(sensitivity-[1-specificity]) from the receiver operating characteristic analysis to identify high versus low levels. The Youden index is a global measure of a biomarker's effectiveness that calculates to the maximum difference between sensitivity and 1 specificity.¹⁷ Cut points for CRP, FDP, HSP-70, and suPAR were 3 mg/L, 1.0 µg/mL, 0.313 ng/mL, and 3.5 ng/mL, respectively, as described previously.^{6,11} A 3-BRS was derived by counting the number of biomarkers above respective cut points.

Discrimination analysis for the prediction of each end point was calculated as the difference in C statistic comparing the baseline model incorporating traditional risk factors (model 1), a second model including the 3 biomarkers (model 2), and finally a model containing the 3 biomarkers in addition to suPAR levels (model 3). C statistics, continuous net reclassification index, and integrated discrimination improvement metrics comparing model 3 to models 1 and 2 were calculated using the R package *survCI* and *survIDINRI*.¹⁸⁻²¹

Average annual event rates for each outcome measure were calculated by dividing the observed number of events by the observed event-specific number of person-years of follow-up. Interaction terms of each covariate on the association of the aggregate BRS and the primary end point were evaluated and demonstrated using a forest plot.²² The independent association of the BRS with the presence of $\geq 50\%$ stenosis in any major coronary artery was evaluated with a binary logistic regression model adjusting for known cardiovascular risk factors, including age, sex, diabetes mellitus, hypertension, dyslipidemia, and smoking status. *P* values < 0.05 from 2-sided tests were considered statistically significant. Statistical analyses were performed with SAS (Version 9.3; SAS Institute, NC).

Results

Relationship Between Biomarker Risk Score and Clinical Risk Factors

The relationships between the categories of the BRS and the clinical and demographic factors are listed in Table 1. Although the absolute differences in most of the parameters were small, subjects with a higher BRS were more likely to be older, female, black, diabetic, hypertensive, and active smoker and to have lower left ventricular ejection fraction and lower estimated glomerular filtration rate. There was no significant difference in management strategy (ie, medical versus revascularization) between patients in different categories of the BRS.

Relationship of Biomarker Risk Score With Angiographic CAD

Patients with higher BRS were more likely to have at least one epicardial vessel with $\geq 50\%$ stenosis and higher burden of CAD as quantified by higher Gensini score (Table 1). Conversely, visually normal coronary arteries were more likely to be present in those with a lower compared with a higher BRS. Compared with those with a BRS of 0 or 1, those with BRS ≥ 2 had 25% increased odds of having significant CAD ($> 50\%$ stenosis; odds ratio, 1.25; $P = 0.013$), independent of age, sex, diabetes mellitus, hypertension, dyslipidemia, and smoking status. Similarly, the BRS was an independent correlate of severity of CAD assessed by the Gensini score after adjustment for variables listed above.

Clinical and Demographic Predictors of Incident Adverse Outcomes

Over a median follow-up of 2.3 years and a total of 7539 patient-years of follow-up, 269 subjects died (8.2%), 116 had an MI (3.5%), 153 (4.7%) had cardiovascular death, 35 had

stroke (1.1%), and 353 underwent revascularization (10.8%; Table 1). In a Cox proportional hazard model for the composite end point of all-cause death/MI adjusting for all the aforementioned demographic and clinical covariates, significant predictors were age (years; hazard ratio [HR], 1.02; 95% confidence interval [CI], 1.01–1.03), estimated glomerular filtration rate (mL/min; HR, 0.99; 95% CI, 0.993–0.999), acute MI (HR, 1.97; 95% CI, 1.49–2.59), diabetes mellitus (HR, 1.65; 95% CI, 1.32–2.08), active smoking (HR, 1.42; 95% CI, 1.05–1.93), left ventricular ejection fraction (%; HR, 0.98; 95% CI, 0.97–0.98), Gensini score (HR, 1.003; 95% CI, 1.001–1.005), aspirin use (HR, 0.69; 95% CI, 0.46–0.85), and clopidogrel use (HR, 1.43; 95% CI, 1.11–1.84); *P* value for all < 0.05 . We think that the elevated hazard ratio associated with clopidogrel use is likely related to a high-risk inherent to individuals taking this antiplatelet medication.

Relationship Between Biomarker Risk Score and Outcomes

Correlation analyses between the 4 biomarkers revealed weak but significant correlations (Table 2). An increased (above cutoff) level of each biomarker was independently associated with future risk of all-cause death, cardiovascular death, composite of death and MI, combined death, MI, and revascularization, and composite of death, MI, and stroke after adjustment for the noted clinical covariates. Only elevated CRP was not significantly associated with future cardiovascular death (Table 3). Importantly, a high suPAR level was an independent predictor of all incident outcome measures in models adjusted for all aforementioned variables, as well as a 3-BRS comprising CRP, FDP, and HSP-70. For instance, a high suPAR level was independently associated with incident all-cause death/MI (HR, 1.83; $P < 0.001$; Table 3).

The 4-BRS was associated with a graded increase in risk of each of the end points noted. When analyzed as a numeric scale in Cox proportional hazard models adjusting for all previously described variables, each 1 U increase in the BRS was associated with 1.94-fold increased risk of all-cause death, 1.71-fold increased risk of cardiovascular death, 1.77-fold increased risk of death/MI, 1.45-fold increase in the risk of death/MI/revascularization, and 1.72-fold increased risk of death/MI/stroke ($P < 0.001$ for all). Comparison of hazard ratios for those with 1, 2, 3, and 4 elevated biomarkers compared with those with no elevated biomarker are presented in Table 3, and cumulative incidence plots are shown in Figure 1. Thus, compared with those with a BRS of 0, those with a BRS of 4 had an 8.8-fold ($P < 0.001$) increased odds of having death or MI or a 6.76-fold ($P < 0.001$) increased risk of cardiovascular death. Average annual event rates increased in a graded fashion across the categories of the BRS, with the 2.6% of subjects with a BRS of 4 having on average 21% per year risk of death/MI compared with a 1.1% event rate in the 28% of subjects with a BRS of 0 (Figure 2). Average annual event rates for each end point across categories of the BRS are presented in Figure 2.

Discrimination Testing

The addition of suPAR to a model consisting of clinical covariates and the 3-BRS was associated with significant

Table 1. Baseline Characteristics

Baseline Characteristics	Total (N=3278)	Number of Elevated Biomarkers					P Value for Trend
		0 (N=923)	1 (N=1141)	2 (N=796)	3 (N=332)	4 (N=86)	
Demographics							
Age, y	63±12	62±11	62±13	64±12	66±11	66±11	<0.001
Male sex, N (%)	2105 (64%)	686 (74%)	740 (65%)	437 (55%)	189 (57%)	53 (62%)	<0.001
White, N (%)	2709 (83%)	793 (86%)	939 (82%)	647 (81%)	264 (79%)	66 (78%)	0.015
Systolic BP, mm Hg	137±23	136±20	137±23	138±23	138±26	132±24	0.062
Diastolic BP, mm Hg	76±12	76±11	76±12	75±12	75±13	74±11	0.045
BMI, kg/m ²	30±6	29±5	30±6	30±7	30±7	28±6	<0.001
Comorbidities							
Acute MI on presentation, N (%)	389 (11%)	57 (6.3%)	141 (12.5%)	110 (14%)	60 (18%)	1 (1.2%)	<0.001
History of prior MI, N (%)	981 (31%)	251 (28%)	319 (29%)	259 (33%)	124 (38%)	28 (34%)	0.001
Diabetes mellitus, N (%)	1033 (31%)	199 (22%)	329 (29%)	316 (40%)	146 (44%)	43 (50%)	<0.001
Hypertension, N (%)	2362 (72%)	632 (68%)	818 (72%)	597 (75%)	255 (77%)	60 (70%)	0.010
Dyslipidemia, N (%)	2291 (70%)	660 (71%)	805 (71%)	550 (69%)	229 (69%)	47 (55%)	0.024
Current smoking, N (%)	484 (15%)	90 (10%)	191 (17%)	143 (18%)	53 (17%)	7 (8.4%)	<0.001
History of prior CABG, N (%)	721 (22%)	192 (21%)	233 (20%)	169 (21%)	96 (29%)	31 (36%)	<0.001
History of prior angioplasty, N (%)	1342 (42%)	382 (42%)	462 (41%)	328 (42%)	137 (42%)	33 (39%)	0.963
LVEF, %	53±12	55±11	54±12	52±14	50±14	44±18	<0.001
Medications							
Statin use, N (%)	2378 (72%)	696 (75%)	831 (73%)	568 (71%)	231 (70%)	52 (60%)	0.016
Aspirin use, N (%)	2652 (81%)	749 (81%)	931 (82%)	637 (80%)	272 (82%)	63 (73%)	0.371
Clopidogrel use, N (%)	1516 (46%)	412 (45%)	532 (47%)	353 (44%)	183 (55%)	36 (42%)	0.010
Beta-blocker use, N (%)	2075 (63%)	523 (57%)	720 (63%)	538 (68%)	235 (71%)	59 (69%)	<0.001
ACE-inh/ARB use, N (%)	2042 (62%)	536 (58%)	748 (67%)	504 (63%)	208 (63%)	46 (53%)	0.004
Angiographic findings							
Gensini angiographic score, median (IQR)	12 (0–50)	11 (0–50)	11 (0–48)	12 (0–48)	20 (2.1–61)	20 (1.4–85)	0.001
≥50% epicardial vessel stenosis, N (%)	2026 (66%)	547 (63%)	706 (66%)	494 (68%)	225 (73%)	54 (68%)	0.024
Visually normal coronaries, N (%)	656 (20%)	208 (22.5%)	240 (21%)	155 (19%)	44 (13%)	9 (11%)	0.001
Laboratory values							
GFR, mL/min	76±47	81±44	82±49	71±49	60±44	54±43	<0.001
LDL, mg/dL	99±37	98±35	102±39	100±38	96±39	97±35	0.070
HDL, mg/dL	42±13	43±12	42±13	41±12	40±13	42±15	0.002
Biomarkers							
CRP, mg/L, median (IQR)	3.0 (1.2–7.6)	1.1 (0.6–1.9)	3.4 (1.45–6.9)	6.0 (3.2–10)	9.6 (4.7–18)	8.9 (4.9–22)	<0.001
HSP-70, ng/mL, median (IQR)	0.0 (0.0–0.0)	0.0 (0.0–0.0)	0.0 (0.0–0.0)	0.0 (0.0–8.0)	4.0 (0.0–189.2)	264 (106–635)	<0.001
FDP, µg/mL, median (IQR)	0.5 (0.3–0.8)	0.4 (0.3–0.5)	0.5 (0.3–0.7)	0.6 (0.4–1.0)	1.2 (0.7–2.1)	1.7 (1.2–4.6)	<0.001
suPAR, ng/mL, median (IQR)	3.0 (2.3–3.9)	2.4 (2.0–2.9)	2.8 (2.2–3.4)	3.9 (3.0–4.9)	4.5 (3.7–6.0)	5.3 (4.1–7.1)	<0.001
Management strategy							0.539
Medical management, N (%)	1863 (57%)	551 (60%)	632 (55%)	443 (56%)	188 (57%)	49 (57%)	...
Revascularization, N (%)	1260 (38%)	337 (36%)	449 (39.4%)	316 (40%)	127 (38.3%)	31 (36%)	...
Other, N (%)	155 (4.7%)	35 (3.8%)	60 (5.3%)	37 (4.6%)	17 (5.1%)	6 (7%)	...

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued

Baseline Characteristics	Total (N=3278)	Number of Elevated Biomarkers					P Value for Trend
		0 (N=923)	1 (N=1141)	2 (N=796)	3 (N=332)	4 (N=86)	
Follow-up events							
MI, N (%)	116 (3%)	16 (2%)	40 (3%)	25 (3%)	29 (9%)	6 (7%)	<0.001
All-cause death, N (%)	269 (8%)	21 (2%)	46 (4%)	79 (10%)	86 (26%)	37 (43%)	<0.001
Cardiovascular death, N (%)	153 (5%)	14 (1%)	27 (2%)	43 (5%)	48 (14%)	21 (24%)	<0.001
All-cause death/MI, N (%)	363 (11%)	34 (4%)	82 (7%)	98 (12%)	109 (33%)	40 (46%)	<0.001
All-cause death/MI/revascularization, N (%)	628 (19%)	92 (10%)	187 (16%)	167 (21%)	138 (42%)	44 (51%)	<0.001
All-cause death/MI/stroke, N (%)	392 (12%)	39 (4%)	91 (8%)	108 (14%)	113 (34%)	41 (48%)	<0.001

ACE indicates angiotensin-converting enzyme; ARB, angiotensin receptor blocker; BMI, body mass index; BP, blood pressure; CABG, coronary artery bypass graft; CRP, C-reactive protein; FDP, fibrin degradation products; GFR, glomerular filtration rate; HDL, high-density lipoprotein; HSP, heat shock protein; IQR, interquartile range; LDL, low-density lipoprotein; LVEF, left ventricular ejection fraction; MI, myocardial infarction; and suPAR, soluble urokinase plasminogen activator receptor.

improvement in risk reclassification metrics and C statistic with respect to the primary end point of all-cause death and MI, as well as the outcomes of all-cause death, cardiovascular death, and the combined outcomes (Table 4).

Discussion

Several pathways are involved and act synergistically in the development of atherosclerotic plaque and its progression to the stage of plaque instability and rupture. We had previously identified a BRS comprising CRP, FDP, and HSP-70 that predicted risk of incident MI and death but did not correlate with the presence or severity of CAD.⁶ The present study demonstrates that the circulating level of suPAR is an independent predictor of adverse CVD outcomes after adjustment for all traditional cardiovascular risk factors and levels of CRP, FDP, and HSP-70. Moreover, the addition of suPAR to a 3-BRS based on the aforementioned biomarkers improves risk reclassification metrics of the C statistic, net reclassification index, and integrated discrimination improvement. When comparing this 4-BRS strategy to our prior study involving 3 biomarkers, we found that only the 4-BRS and not the 3-BRS was independently associated with both presence and severity of CAD.

The urokinase plasminogen activator is a serine protease produced by smooth muscle cells, vascular endothelial cells, macrophages, monocytes, and fibroblasts, and when bound to its receptor (urokinase plasminogen activator receptor), it leads to the generation of plasmin.^{7,23} Urokinase plasminogen activator receptor is involved in several functions, including migration, adhesion, fibrinolysis, and cell proliferation.²⁴⁻²⁶ Plasma suPAR reflects cellular shedding of urokinase plasminogen activator receptor, which is induced during inflammation; shedding seems to be free of circadian changes and is relatively stable during periods of acute stress.^{9,27} suPAR has been reported to predict incident CVD independent of the Framingham risk score in healthy populations free of CVD^{28,29} and in those with CVD.^{10,11}

CRP has been widely studied in populations free of CVD,^{30,31} as well as in cohorts with established CAD; it predicts incident CVD and major adverse cardiovascular events independent of traditional cardiovascular risk factors.^{32,33} HSPs are abundant intracellular proteins that aid in a cell's response to

acute stress and are involved in protein folding and transport.³⁴ HSP-70 is one of the more extensively studied HSPs; yet, its relationship with CAD has been controversial.³⁵ It seems that while lower levels are associated with long-term development of atherosclerotic plaque,³⁵ higher levels predispose to higher risk of plaque rupture and incident future outcomes.⁶ FDPs are measures of ongoing fibrin/fibrinogen degradation. Increased plasma FDP level predicts incident cardiovascular events in patients with peripheral vascular disease.³⁶ Plasma D-dimer, which is one of the products included in the FDP analysis, is a marker of turnover of cross-linked fibrin; it was higher in those with CAD compared with that in healthy controls³⁷ and predicted adverse cardiovascular events in healthy individuals independent of cardiovascular risk factors.³⁸ Similarly, in the BARI 2D study (Bypass Angioplasty Revascularization Investigation 2 Diabetes), people with diabetes mellitus with CAD had higher D-dimer levels that were associated with an increased risk of cardiac events.³⁹ FDP ELISA assay used in this study detects the full complement of FDP components, including D-dimer as well as fragments D and E and any additional intermediate products from fibrin degradation.

Table 2. Associations Between Biomarkers

	HSP-70	FDP	CRP
suPAR			
r*	0.16	0.27	0.27
p	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
CRP			
r	0.072	0.22	
p	<0.001	<0.001	
FDP			
r	0.18		
p	<0.001		

CRP indicates C-reactive protein; FDP, fibrin degradation products; HSP, heat shock protein; and suPAR, soluble urokinase plasminogen activator receptor.

*r value represents correlation coefficient of the Spearman bivariate correlation test. Statistically significant direct 2-by-2 correlations were observed between biomarkers.

Table 3. Association Between Major Cardiovascular Events and the Biomarkers Individually and as the BRS

	HR (95% CI); P Value				
	All-Cause Death	Cardiovascular Death*	All-Cause Death and MI	All-Cause Death, MI, Revascularization	All-Cause Death, MI, Stroke
All biomarkers in same model					
CRP ≥ 3.0 mg/L	1.69 (1.26–2.27), <i>P</i> <0.001	1.57 (0.39–6.38), <i>P</i> =0.53	1.58 (1.24–2.02), <i>P</i> <0.001	1.31 (1.09–1.56), <i>P</i> =0.003	1.58 (1.25–2.00), <i>P</i> <0.001
HSP-70 >0.313 ng/mL	1.98 (1.46–2.67), <i>P</i> <0.001	1.79 (1.17–2.73), <i>P</i> =0.01	2.22 (1.71–2.87), <i>P</i> <0.001	1.94 (1.60–2.35), <i>P</i> <0.001	1.99 (1.56–2.55), <i>P</i> <0.001
FDP ≥ 1.0 μ g/mL	1.87 (1.42–2.46), <i>P</i> <0.001	1.79 (1.25–2.58), <i>P</i> =0.002	1.57 (1.23–1.99), <i>P</i> <0.001	1.41 (1.16–1.70), <i>P</i> <0.001	1.60 (1.27–2.01), <i>P</i> <0.001
suPAR ≥ 3.5 ng/mL	2.31 (1.71–3.13), <i>P</i> <0.001	2.12 (1.37–3.26), <i>P</i> <0.001	1.83 (1.43–2.35), <i>P</i> <0.001	1.29 (1.07–1.55), <i>P</i> =0.006	1.78 (1.40–2.25), <i>P</i> <0.001
Categorical					
1 vs 0 markers	1.68 (0.96–2.93), <i>P</i> =0.065	1.59 (0.79–3.19), <i>P</i> =0.20	1.81 (1.19–2.76), <i>P</i> =0.005	1.63 (1.25–2.11), <i>P</i> <0.001	1.74 (1.18–2.59), <i>P</i> =0.005
2 vs 0 markers*	3.40 (2.0–5.76), <i>P</i> <0.001	2.52 (1.27–5.01), <i>P</i> =0.01	2.59 (1.70–3.94), <i>P</i> <0.001	1.93 (1.47–2.54), <i>P</i> <0.001	2.49 (1.68–3.69), <i>P</i> <0.001
3 vs 0 markers*	7.59 (4.46–12.91), <i>P</i> <0.001	5.60 (2.72–11.56), <i>P</i> <0.001	6.17 (4.05–9.40), <i>P</i> <0.001	3.68 (2.75–4.91), <i>P</i> <0.001	5.60 (3.76–8.34), <i>P</i> <0.001
4 vs 0 markers*	11.87 (6.5–21.65), <i>P</i> <0.001	6.76 (2.81–16.26), <i>P</i> <0.001	8.8 (5.32–14.57), <i>P</i> <0.001	4.17 (2.82–6.17), <i>P</i> <0.001	7.99 (4.93–12.93), <i>P</i> <0.001

Analyses were adjusted for age, sex, race, body mass index, glomerular filtration rate, acute myocardial infarction, history of previous myocardial infarction, hypertension, dyslipidemia, diabetes mellitus, left ventricular ejection fraction, history of coronary bypass graft surgery, history of coronary angioplasty, active smoking, Gensini angiographic severity score, aspirin use, statin use, and clopidogrel use. BRS indicates biomarker risk score; CI, confidence interval; CRP, C-reactive protein; FDP, fibrin degradation products; HR, hazard ratio; HSP, heat shock protein; MI, myocardial infarction; and suPAR, soluble urokinase plasminogen activator receptor.

*Fine and Gray's subdistribution hazard model was used to analyze cardiovascular death outcome, considering noncardiovascular death as the competing risk event. Patients with 0 elevated marker was treated as the reference category for the analysis of cardiovascular death.

Previous studies investigating the role of multiple biomarkers in populations without CVD have demonstrated only slight improvements in predictive potential (using C statistic) when added to standard clinical models.^{40–42} In contrast, our study establishes the value of a multimarker aggregate score in a high-risk population with suspected or established CAD, a group in which traditional risk scores such as Framingham have failed to identify risk of recurrent CVD events. We have shown that despite a statistically significant 2-by-2 correlation between the 4 biomarkers, the observed correlation coefficients

were rather modest. This finding is compatible with the concept that these biomarkers act independently and do so with their predominant activities involving separate biological pathways. It is well known that the immune system, partly because of stimulation of inflammatory pathways, plays an important role in the pathogenesis of atherosclerosis and in the activation of pathways leading to plaque rupture.⁴³ Here we have shown that a BRS comprising suPAR (a biomarker of immune system activation and of inflammation) in addition to CRP, FDP, and HSP-70 significantly predicts all major outcomes, as well as

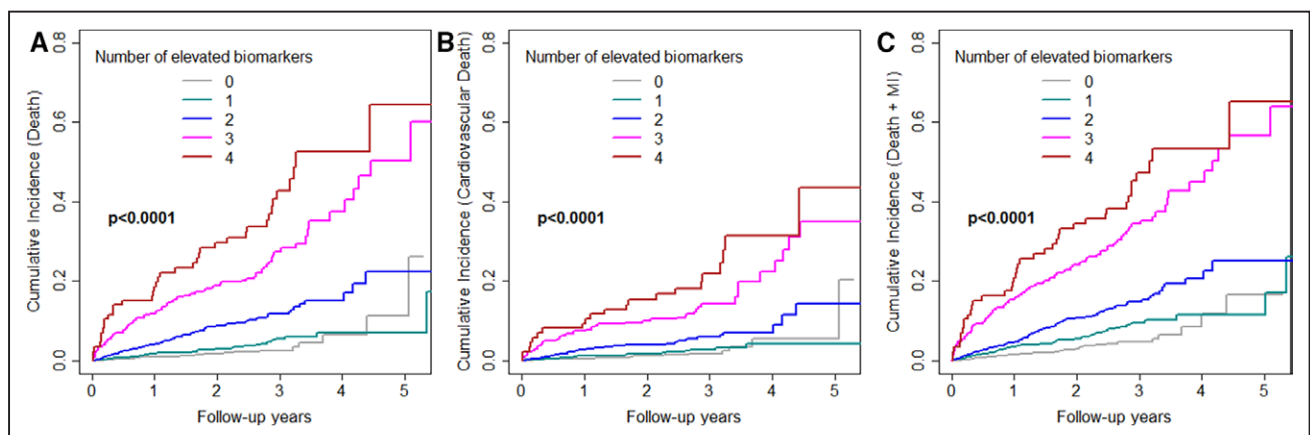


Figure 1. Cumulative incidence plots for all-cause death (A), cardiovascular death (B), and all-cause death/MI (C) per category of the biomarker risk score. MI indicates myocardial infarction.

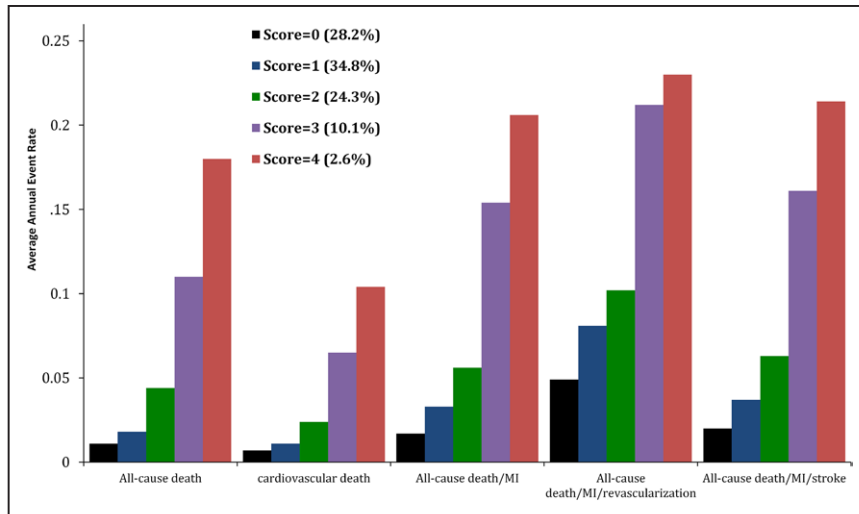


Figure 2. Annual event rates of major cardiovascular events in each category of the biomarker risk score. Percent of patients within each biomarker risk category is listed beside each score. MI indicates myocardial infarction.

the severity of CAD. Thus, although the HR for increase in risk of death and MI was 5-fold greater in those who had 3 positive biomarkers compared with those with a BRS of 0 using the risk score described previously, the HR was 8.8-fold greater in those with 4 positive biomarkers using the 4 aggregate BRS.⁶ This corresponds to an average annual event rate of 21% in these patients. Use of this BRS in conjunction with other readily available clinical factors could potentially guide clinicians in appropriate identification of patients at highest risk with use of more aggressive treatment options, risk factor control, and behavioral modification counseling. Conversely, identification of patients at low risk could prevent unnecessary testing in this population. Whether this improvement in the ability to predict risk impacts clinical management, however, remains

to be determined and requires the establishment and study of therapeutic algorithms based on these biomarkers.

Strengths and Limitations

Our study has several strengths. We enrolled individuals of both genders and races, those with acute MI, and patients with a range of left ventricular ejection fraction, reflecting a population that is at high risk yet typical of those undergoing cardiac catheterization. Biomarker evaluation was performed at one time point by the same laboratory personnel, which minimized variability. C statistic, net reclassification index, and integrated discrimination improvement were calculated using survival models, which allows for better model discrimination and overall predictive ability. Limitations of our

Table 4. Discrimination Analysis of the Biomarker Risk Score With Major Cardiovascular Events

Model	C Statistic (95% CI)	Δ C Statistic (95% CI)	Continuous NRI (95% CI)	Relative IDI (95% CI)
All-cause death/MI				
3-biomarker risk score	0.71 (0.67–0.75)	...	...	...
3-biomarker risk score+suPAR	0.74 (0.70–0.78)	0.03 (0.01–0.05)	0.60 (0.28–0.96)	0.10 (0.03–0.17)
All-cause death				
3-biomarker risk score	0.71 (0.67–0.75)	...	...	...
3-biomarker risk score+suPAR	0.74 (0.70–0.78)	0.03 (0.01–0.06)	0.61 (0.27–0.99)	0.11 (0.03–0.19)
Cardiovascular death				
3-biomarker risk score	0.71 (0.66–0.76)	...	...	...
3-biomarker risk score+suPAR	0.73 (0.68–0.79)	0.02 (0.00–0.05)	0.60 (0.13–0.86)	0.08 (0.01–0.16)
All-cause death/MI/revascularization				
3-biomarker risk score	0.66 (0.63–0.69)	...	...	...
3-biomarker risk score+suPAR	0.67 (0.64–0.70)	0.01 (0.00–0.02)	0.57 (0.26–0.83)	0.05 (0.01–0.09)
All-cause death/MI/stroke				
3-biomarker risk score	0.70 (0.66–0.75)	...	...	...
3-biomarker risk score+suPAR	0.73 (0.70–0.77)	0.03 (0.01–0.05)	0.60 (0.10–0.99)	0.10 (0.02–0.16)

Baseline model comprised age, sex, race, body mass index, a history of smoking, glomerular filtration rate, history of myocardial infarction, history of revascularization (coronary bypass graft or percutaneous coronary intervention), hypertension, dyslipidemia, diabetes mellitus, left ventricular ejection fraction, presence of obstructive coronary artery disease, aspirin use, statin use, and clopidogrel use. CI indicates confidence interval; IDI, integrated discrimination improvement; MI, myocardial infarction; NRI, net reclassification index; and suPAR, soluble urokinase plasminogen activator receptor.

study include a one-time measurement of biomarkers that may not reflect fluctuations in their levels over time. Despite rigorous attempts in controlling for confounding variables, our inability to adjust for a well-validated comorbidity index in this study further adds to limitations. Our results need to be further validated and should not be generalized to a population without suspected or known CAD. Furthermore, future studies are needed to assess cost-effectiveness of using this multimarker BRS in routine clinical practice.

In conclusion, a 4-BRS representing inflammation, coagulation, cell stress, and immune pathways significantly predicts risk of MI and death and significantly improves risk reclassification beyond a 3-BRS. Whether more aggressive medical management in individuals with high BRS would lead to a decrease in the BRS and whether such a decrease, if it occurs, modifies subsequent risk of outcomes remain to be studied.

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Disclosures

Drs Epstein and Quyyumi are equity holders in GenWay Biotech and receive consulting fees. T. Pielak and C.W. Thorball are employed by Virogates (Denmark). The other authors report no conflicts.

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Pathway-Specific Aggregate Biomarker Risk Score Is Associated With Burden of Coronary Artery Disease and Predicts Near-Term Risk of Myocardial Infarction and Death

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