Mitral Valve Surgery in Women
Another Target for Eradicating Sex Inequality

Christian McNeely, MD; Christina Vassileva, MD

Sex differences in outcomes have been noted in many areas of cardiovascular medicine. In mitral valve surgery, this topic is particularly important because in appropriately selected patients, mitral valve repair restores normal life expectancy, which cannot be said for other cardiac surgical operations. Current literature is replete with evidence supporting continued sex inequality in the detection and treatment of mitral valve disease. Women, although just as likely to have significant MR, are less likely to receive surgery than men, and when they do, they have worse observed outcomes after their operation. When women are referred for surgery, they typically present with more comorbidities and later in the disease process and have a lower likelihood of receiving mitral repair, the superiority of which over replacement has been firmly established for degenerative disease.1,2

There is no established medical therapy for degenerative mitral regurgitation (MR), and surgery remains the gold standard for severe MR associated with symptoms and ventricular dysfunction.3 Longstanding MR leads to many untoward consequences, including ventricular dysfunction, left atrial enlargement, development of secondary atrial fibrillation, pulmonary hypertension, and tricuspid regurgitation, and if left untreated, it inevitably leads to decompensated heart failure.4 Late referral to surgery does not always reverse these negative sequelae. It is, therefore, important that this condition is detected early to prevent these untoward consequences and provide patients with the full benefit of their operation.5

Significant differences are noted in the baseline characteristics of women versus men presenting for mitral valve surgery. Women present at an older age, with excess comorbidity burden, including higher incidence of preoperative transient ischemic attack/stroke, atrial fibrillation, heart failure, respiratory failure, anemia, and others, and are more likely than men to have an urgent operation. At the time of mitral valve surgery, women are also more likely to undergo concomitant surgery for atrial fibrillation and tricuspid intervention, presumably reflecting higher incidence of atrial fibrillation and tricuspid regurgitation—factors known to reflect more advanced disease.6,7 The higher comorbid burden at presentation offers an explanation of the higher mortality in women undergoing mitral valve surgery compared with men.6,8 Data from the Society of Thoracic Surgeons Adult Cardiac Surgery Database (STS ACSD) demonstrated that in patients aged between 40 and 59 years, women had 2.5 times higher risk-adjusted mortality compared with men for isolated mitral valve operations. The survival disadvantage seemed to diminish with age.4 In a study of 47,602 Medicare beneficiaries with isolated mitral valve surgery, we demonstrated higher operative mortality for women compared with men (7.7% versus 6.1%; P<0.0001), and this was true both for the subset undergoing repair (4.2% versus 3.5%; P=0.0112) and replacement (9.3% versus 8.2%; P=0.0018). After adjustment for differences in baseline characteristics, operative mortality for mitral repair seemed similar between women and men, suggesting that this sex disparity might be largely because of worse preoperative profiles of women compared with men.7 Long-term survival differences after mitral valve surgery based on sex have also been reported. A study by Seeberger et al9 of 3761 patients undergoing minimally invasive mitral surgery reported 10-year survival of 58% for women compared with 72% for men. In the Medicare fee-for-service population, we found that in the subset of patients who underwent isolated mitral repair, long-term survival was worse for women, but this difference disappeared after risk adjustment. When taking sex into account, mitral repair seemed to restore normal life expectancy for men but not for women, and this might help explain the higher observed long-term mortality.7

Lower mitral repair rates for women have been documented across multiple data sources, including the Nationwide Inpatient Sample database, the Medicare database, and the STS ACSD.6,7,10 Considering the established superiority of mitral repair over replacement, addressing the lower likelihood of women to receive mitral repair compared with men represents an important opportunity in quality of care initiatives aimed at eradicating healthcare disparities. Compared with replacement, mitral repair is associated with improved survival, better preservation of ventricular function, lower risk of reoperation, and endocarditis, among others. In appropriately selected patients, mitral repair restores normal life expectancy to that of the age- and sex-matched US population.12 As a result, mitral valve repair rates have been proposed as a key indicator of quality in mitral valve surgery.10 Sex differences in mitral valve morphology and disease lesion have been documented and may partly explain the lower repair rates in women. Higher

From the Department of Medicine, Washington University School of Medicine, Saint Louis, MO (C.M.); and Division of Cardiothoracic Surgery, Department of Surgery, Southern Illinois University School of Medicine, Springfield (C.V.).

Correspondence to Christina M. Vassileva, MD, Division of Cardiothoracic Surgery, Southern Illinois University School of Medicine, 701 N First St, PO Box 19638, Springfield, IL 62794. E-mail cvassileva@siumed.edu

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incidence of anterior and bileaflet prolapse is more common in
women,\textsuperscript{11} whereas posterior leaflet prolapse, which is techni-
cally easier to repair and, in general, results in higher long-
term durability, is more predominant in men.\textsuperscript{9} Posterior leaflet
calcification and mixed regurgitation/stenosis have been noted
more often in women and may further play a role in the ability
to repair the valve.\textsuperscript{9} Degenerative mitral stenosis (MS) is rare
and was almost exclusively found in women in 1 routine echo-
cardiographic study. It was, furthermore, noted to increase
with age and was present in 2.5\% in patients aged \(\geq\) 90 years.\textsuperscript{12}
Because women live longer than men, it is possible that this
entity is detected preferentially in female patients. In many
large-scale studies, the cause of mitral valve disease is not
reported and has been difficult to ascertain. Consequently, it
is unclear whether the lower repair rates in women that are
reported might be, in part, because of inclusion of patients
with rheumatic mitral disease, considering the significantly
higher prevalence of MS in women. A retrospective study of
24,265 echocardiograms between 1984 and 1998 noted similar
prevalence of MR in both sexes, whereas the prevalence of
MS, although rare, was significantly higher in women com-
pared with men (1.6\% versus 0.4\%; \(P\leq\) 0.001).\textsuperscript{13} Nevertheless,
despite declining incidence of MS noted in the STS ACSD, we
did not observe a trend over time to suggest that repair rates
for women are increasing over those for men.\textsuperscript{4,10} Higher hos-
pital and surgeon volumes have been associated with higher
repair rates.\textsuperscript{14–16} Targeted referral of complex valve pathology
to experienced centers has been proposed as a way to provide
better care of patients with mitral valve disease by providing
high repair success rates\textsuperscript{7} and may be particularly relevant
in women to ensure sex equality in care.

Although higher preoperative comorbid burden suggests
that women present later in their disease process, it is unclear
whether this is driven by patient or physician factors. Sex dif-
f erences in attitudes toward seeking medical attention have
not been extensively studied.\textsuperscript{18,19} Whether sex differences exist
with respect to likelihood to seek care in mitral valve disease
is unknown but constitutes an important aspect of the multi-
faceted problem of sex disparity in mitral valve surgery.

Appropriate timing of surgery in patients with MR is
extremely important, as early surgery has been associated
with improved long-term outcomes.\textsuperscript{20–23} This has now been
incorporated in the most recent guidelines that emphasize
an aggressive approach in patients with mitral valve disease,
including a class IIa recommendation for surgery in asymp-
tomatic patients with severe MR and preserved ventricular
function if repair success rate of \(>\) 95\% and operative mortal-
ity rate of \(<\) 1\% can be achieved.\textsuperscript{1}

Underestimation of regurgitation severity in women
according to current guidelines because of lower unadjusted
chamber size may lead to decreased referral to surgery in
women or delayed referral until severe chamber enlargement
is present. Avierinos et al\textsuperscript{11} studied \(>\) 8000 patients with mitral
valve prolapse and had extensive follow-up with echocardiog-
draphic data. Among patients with severe MR, women were
21\% less likely to be referred for surgery, even after adjusting
for age, ejection fraction, and regurgitation severity. Whether a
less severe symptom profile exists among women is unknown.
However, it is likely that morphological differences between
sexes are contributing to this referral bias. Women have smaller
cardiac dimensions in general, and after matching sexes by the
severity of MR, women have significantly smaller ventricu-
lar and atrial dimensions.\textsuperscript{11,24} Because American College of
Cardiology/American Heart Association guidelines use left
ventricular end-systolic dimension \(\geq\) 4.0 cm, without correct-
tion to body surface area, as a class I indication for surgery,
it is possible that we are missing a significant segment of the
population who would benefit from surgery. Indeed, in the
same study, only 5.7\% of women compared with 9.6\% of men
with severe MR had left ventricular end-systolic dimensions
that were \(>\) 4.5 cm (\(P\leq\) 0.001). After normalization to body sur-
face area, however, women had larger ventricular and atrial
changes than men.\textsuperscript{11} Given that quantitative assessment of MR
also includes regurgitant volume, among other values, there
could also be quantitative underestimation of MR in women
or patients with small left ventricles.\textsuperscript{25}

Physician bias in diagnosis and referral might also play a
role and may be related to differences in symptoms at presen-
tation. Elderly women are less active than their male counter-
parts and may present with more insidious symptoms, such
as fatigue as opposed to shortness of breath, with the latter
more likely to trigger a cardiac evaluation. Poor compliance
with mitral valve guidelines by treating cardiologists has been
documented,\textsuperscript{26–29} but it is unknown whether it contributes to
preferential nonreferral or delayed referral for women.

In summary, there continues to be an observed sex dis-
pparity in mitral valve surgery. Women present with worse
preoperative profile and have a lower likelihood of referral to
mitral valve surgery. Furthermore, women receive lower rates
of mitral repair, and whether this is because of differences
in disease etiology, such as higher prevalence of rheumatic
disease and degenerative MS or the presence of complex dis-
ease with higher incidence of anterior and bileaflet prolapse
needs to be studied further. Guideline-directed referral cutoffs
may be contributing to nonreferral or referral for surgery in
women at a later disease stage secondary to smaller body size.
Finally, higher mortality with mitral valve surgery has been
reported compared with men, especially for younger women.
Adjustment for baseline characteristics significantly diminish-
ishes the disparity in outcomes.

It appears that current evidence strongly supports the
role of worse preoperative profiles for women presenting for
mitral valve surgery compared with men as the main driver
of disparity in outcomes. However, the factors responsible for
these findings remain unclear. We believe strong consider-
ation should be given to using sex/body surface area indexing
in surgical referral guidelines. Physicians should also more
closely monitor their female patients with known MR of lesser
grades for symptom development before decompensation.
Better compliance with mitral valve guidelines is likely to
benefit male and female patients alike. Future areas of inves-
tigation must address the potential effect of valve morphol-
ogy, cause, and etiology, as well as sex differences in attitudes
toward seeking medical attention and physician bias lead-
ing to delayed diagnosis or referral for surgical intervention.
Population health research in this area would play a significant
role in the efforts to improve outcomes in women undergoing
mitral valve surgery.
Disclosures

None.

References


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