The ADAMTS13-VWF axis is dysregulated in chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension.

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Full Title

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Take home message

The ADAMTS-13 VWF axis is dysregulated in chronic thromboembolic disease with and without pulmonary hypertension and implicated in their pathogenesis.

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Abstract

Chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension (CTEPH) is an important consequence of pulmonary embolism (PE) that is associated with abnormalities in haemostasis. We investigated the ADAMTS13-VWF axis in CTEPH, including its relationship to disease severity, inflammation, *ABO* groups and *ADAMTS1*3 genetic variants.

ADAMTS13 and VWF plasma antigen levels were measured in patients with CTEPH (n=208), chronic thromboembolic disease without pulmonary hypertension (CTED; n=35), resolved PE (n=28), idiopathic pulmonary arterial hypertension (n=30) and healthy controls (n=68). CTEPH genetic *ABO* associations and protein quantitative trait loci were investigated. ADAMTS-VWF axis abnormalities were assessed in CTEPH and healthy control subsets by measuring ADAMTS13 activity, D-dimers and VWF-multimeric size.

CTEPH patients had decreased ADAMTS13 (adjusted β (95% CI) = -23.4 (-30.9 to -15.1)%, p<0.001) and increased VWF levels (β=+75.5 (44.8 to 113)%, p<0.001) compared to healthy controls. ADAMTS13 levels remained low after reversal of pulmonary hypertension by pulmonary endarterectomy surgery and were equally reduced in CTED. We identify a genetic variant near the *ADAMTS13* gene associated with ADAMTS13 protein that accounted for ~8% of the variation in levels.

The ADAMTS13-VWF axis is dysregulated in CTEPH. This is unrelated to pulmonary hypertension, disease severity or markers of systemic inflammation and implicates the ADAMTS13-VWF axis in CTEPH pathobiology.

Introduction

Chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension (CTEPH) results from failure of thrombus resolution in the pulmonary arteries following acute pulmonary embolism (PE) in ~3% [1]. Organisation and fibrosis of thrombotic material leads to obstruction of proximal pulmonary arteries and the subsequent development of a secondary small vessel vasculopathy, both of which contribute to pulmonary hypertension and subsequent right heart failure [2, 3].

Abnormalities in haemostasis are implicated in CTEPH pathobiology [4, 5]. This includes elevated von Willebrand factor (VWF), a multimeric plasma glycoprotein that is synthesized by vascular endothelial cells and megakaryocytes [6, 7]. VWF plays an important role in platelet recruitment by mediating adhesion of platelets to the endothelium and is also a carrier protein for the pro-coagulant blood clotting factor VIII [7]. VWF activity is normally regulated by ADAMTS13 (a disintegrin and metalloproteinase with a thrombospondin type 1 motif, member 13), a plasma protein that specifically cleaves the more active high molecular weight VWF multimers [8]. ADAMTS13 is predominately produced by hepatic stellate cells, in addition to vascular endothelial cells and megakaryocytes [9]. The critical role of ADAMTS13 levels in haemostasis is exemplified by thrombotic thrombocytopenic purpura (TTP), characterised by micro-angiopathic thrombosis, in which plasma levels of ADAMTS13 are severely reduced by autoantibodies or rare *ADAMTS13* mutations [10].

Plasma VWF is increased in a range of thrombotic conditions including coronary artery disease (CAD), ischaemic stroke and venous thromboembolism (VTE) [11, 12]. Conversely, plasma ADAMTS13 is modestly reduced in CAD and ischaemic stroke [11, 13]. There are discordant findings in patients with acute PE, with increased, no difference and decreased ADAMTS13 reported [14-16]. VWF and Factor VIII are known to be elevated in CTEPH and do not change following pulmonary endarterectomy (PEA) suggesting a role in pathogenesis [6]. Whilst VWF cleaving protease has been indirectly assessed in CTEPH the direct role of ADAMTS13 has not been investigated to date [6].

A large proportion of the variation in VWF levels is genetically determined, with 30% due to *ABO* groups [17]. The *ADAMTS13* gene is situated ~200 kilobases (kb) downstream of *ABO* and is genetically regulated with 20% of its variance attributable to common variants at the *ADAMTS13* locus [18]. ADAMTS13 is not known to vary with *ABO* groups in healthy cohorts [19]. Similar to other thrombotic diseases, the non-O blood groups are over-represented in CTEPH suggesting a mechanism by which VWF levels are increased [20]. We aimed to investigate the ADAMTS13-VWF axis in CTEPH patients including its relationship to *ABO* groups and *ADAMTS1*3 genetic variants.

Methods

Study samples and participants

The study was approved by the regional ethics committee (REC no. 08/H0304/56 and 08/H0802/32) and all study participants provided written informed consent from their respective institutions.

Consecutive CTEPH patients from the national pulmonary endarterectomy (PEA) centre (Royal Papworth Hospital, United Kingdom (UK)) with available plasma samples (August 2013-December 2016) (supplementary figure S1) and genotype data were included in the study (n=208). Healthy volunteers (n=68) were used as a control group (Papworth and Hammersmith Hospital, UK). Additional patient groups were recruited as disease comparators including: chronic thromboembolic disease (CTED, n=35), idiopathic pulmonary arterial hypertension (IPAH, n=30) and pulmonary embolism (PE, n=28). CTED was characterised by persistent pulmonary arterial thromboembolic occlusions without pulmonary hypertension (mean pulmonary arterial pressure <25mmHg) in symptomatic patients, and other diagnoses were made using international criteria [21, 22].

ADAMTS13 and VWF plasma concentrations

Plasma samples were used to measure ADAMTS13 and VWF antigen (Ag) levels by enzyme-linked immunosorbent assays (ELISA). Samples for the CTEPH, CTED and IPAH groups were obtained closest to the time of diagnosis, and pre-operatively for the

CTEPH and CTED patients undergoing PEA. Additionally, ADAMTS13 and VWF levels were measured in 22 paired post-PEA samples taken at a follow-up time within 1 year of surgery to assess the effect of PEA. The PE group were sampled from a specialist PE follow-up service (Hammersmith, UK) at a median of 220 (interquartile range (IQR) 218) days following an acute PE.

ADAMTS13 and VWF plasma antigen levels were quantified using polyclonal rabbit anti-ADAMTS13 and anti-VWF antibodies as previously described (supplementary material) [19, 23].

ADAMTS13 activity, D-dimer, anti-ADAMTS13 autoantibodies and VWF multimeric size

Additional experiments were performed on a subset of the CTEPH (n=21-23) and healthy control (n=14) groups to identify potential mechanisms for any dysregulation of the ADAMTS13-VWF axis. Plasma samples were used to measure ADAMTS13 activity (fluorescence resonance energy transfer (FRETS) assay), D-dimer concentrations (ELISA) and anti-ADAMTS13 autoantibodies (CTEPH: n=23) with further details in the supplementary material. An estimate of VWF multimeric size was made by measuring VWF collagen binding (VWF:CBA) and comparing this with VWF antigen levels (CTEPH: n=21).

Clinical phenotype data

Phenotype data for the CTEPH, CTED and IPAH groups were recorded closest to the time of diagnosis and pre-operatively for the CTEPH and CTED patients undergoing PEA. This included demographics, haemodynamics, WHO functional class, 6-minute walk distance (6mwd), clinical blood tests, smoking history and anticoagulation therapy usage.

Genotype data

Imputed genotype dosages were available from an ongoing international GWAS in CTEPH that will be published separately on recruitment of a validation cohort. All individuals were genotyped on commercially available Illumina assays and imputed to the Haplotype Reference Consortium build 1.1. Additional details and quality controls steps are described in the supplementary material.

Genotypes were available for 207 (185 CTEPH; 22 CTED) after GWAS quality control exclusions. These patients were included in the genetic *ABO* group and protein quantitative trait loci (pQTL) analyses. Matched genotypes and ADAMTS / VWF antigen levels were not available for the healthy control, IPAH or PE groups.

Genetic *ABO* groups

The *ABO* groups A1, A2, B and O were reconstructed using haplotypes from phased data and a described list of tagging *ABO* SNPs (supplementary materials). This resulted in 10 groups (A1A1, A1A2, A1B, A1O, A2A2, A2B, A2O, BB, BO, OO), from which blood groups A, B, AB and O were inferred.

Protein quantitative trait loci

Associations between genetic variants in the *ADAMTS13* gene ± 40kb (n=396 variants), and ADAMTS13 protein levels were evaluated using multivariable linear regression. The model was adjusted for age, sex and ADAMTS13 plasma antigen experimental batch. Additional models were adjusted for VWF antigen levels and the first 5 ancestry informative principal components used in the GWAS analysis. The *ADAMTS13* ± 40kb region included the *ADAMTS13* cis-pQTLs that have previously been described [18, 24, 25].

Statistical analysis

Group differences in ADAMTS13 and VWF antigen levels were assessed using multivariable linear regression adjusted for age, sex, experimental batch (batch1 vs. batch2) and self-reported ethnicity (Caucasian vs. non-Caucasian). The β coefficients and confidence intervals (CI) are presented as percentage change.

Data is presented as median ± interquartile range. Spearman's rank correlation coefficients were used to describe associations between ADAMTS13 or VWF protein levels and clinical phenotypes associated with disease severity and blood markers of inflammation.

Results

Baseline group characteristics are summarised in table 1 and supplementary table S1. Age and sex differed across the groups (p<0.001 and p=0.014) with CTEPH patients being older (median ± IQR: 64 ± 19years) than healthy controls (49 ± 24years). Ethnicity also differed (p<0.001) with more non-Caucasians in the PE group. In the whole CTEPH group, 176 (87%) had a proximal distribution of pulmonary arterial obstruction deemed to be surgically accessible and 150 (72%) underwent pulmonary endarterectomy.

ADAMTS13 plasma concentrations

ADAMTS13 antigen levels were decreased in CTEPH patients (0.889 ± 0.397μg/mL; p<0.001) compared to healthy controls (1.15 ± 0.300μg/mL) (figure 1a). ADAMTS13 was also reduced in CTED (0.831 ± 0.224μg/ml, p<0.001) but levels were similar to CTEPH (p=0.205) (supplementary table S2). There was no difference in ADAMTS13 levels between IPAH (1.12 ± 0.413μg/mL; p=0.373) and healthy controls, though the PE group did exhibit slightly lower levels (0.969 ± 0.704μg/ml; p=0.049).

Multivariable linear regression confirmed that ADAMTS13 was lowest in the CTEPH (β (95% CI) (% change) = -23.4 (-30.9 to -15.1)%, p<0.001) and CTED groups (β = -25.9 (-35.1 to -15.4)%, p<0.001) (supplementary table S3). These observations should be interpreted with the additional models utilising interaction terms presented in the supplementary materials. Increasing age was also associated with lower ADAMTS13 (β = -5.06 (-2.99 to -7.08)% per 10 years, p<0.001). ADAMTS13 antigen levels were not

significantly associated with the PE group (β = -12.0 (-24.0 to 1.97)%, *p*=0.089), nor were they associated with IPAH, sex or ethnicity.

VWF plasma concentrations

We confirmed that VWF antigen levels are increased in CTEPH (16.7 ± 15.2μg/mL; *p*<0.001) compared to healthy controls (8.45 ± 8.77μg/mL) (figure 1b). Furthermore, VWF was increased in CTED (17.0 ± 10.1μg/mL, *p*<0.001) compared to healthy controls, but was no different to CTEPH (*p*=0.834) (supplementary table S2). There was no difference in VWF antigen levels between IPAH (11.6 ± 12.3μg/mL; *p*=0.071) or PE (9.23 ± 9.82μg/mL; *p*=0.433) and healthy controls.

Multivariable linear regression was also used for VWF plasma concentrations as described for ADAMTS13. This confirmed that VWF was significantly increased in the CTEPH (β=+75.5 (44.8 to 113)%, *p*<0.001) and CTED groups (β=+89.5 (48.0 to 143)%, *p*<0.001) (supplementary table S4). VWF plasma concentrations were not significantly associated with the IPAH or PE groups, sex or ethnicity.

The combination of low ADAMTS13 and high VWF antigen levels had a synergistic effect on the odds of CTEPH (Odds ratio (OR) = 14.5 (5.33 to 47.4), *p*<0.001) compared with healthy controls (supplementary figure S2 and supplementary table S5).

ADAMTS13 and VWF: Pre- and post-pulmonary endarterectomy

In 22 CTEPH patients matched samples were taken post-PEA, after a median of 343 (IQR 216) days. There were no differences in ADAMTS13 (median of differences ± IQR: -0.0328 ± 0.250μg/mL, p=0.777) or VWF protein levels (-3.05 ± 10.7μg/mL, p=0.777) following removal of proximal organised thrombus material by pulmonary endarterectomy (figure 2).

ADAMTS13 activity, D-dimer, anti-ADAMTS13 autoantibodies and VWF multimers

Specific ADAMTS13 activity (Activity:antigen (Act:Ag) ratio) was increased in CTEPH (Act:Ag 1.57 ± 0.32) compared with healthy controls (1.05 ± 0.190; p<0.001) (figure 3a).

Plasmin and thrombin are able to inactivate ADAMTS13 proteolytically *in vitro* and plasmin mediated ADAMTS13 cleavage has been observed in TTP [26, 27]. Furthermore, abnormalities in the fibrinolysis pathway have been implicated in CTEPH [4]. Therefore, we used fibrinogen degradation products measured by D-dimer as a potential surrogate marker of plasmin and thrombin activity. D-dimer was increased in CTEPH (1.24 ± 1.25μg/mL) compared to healthy controls (0.538 ± 0.344μg/mL; p=0.030) (figure 3b). Specific ADAMTS13 activity was not correlated with D-dimer in the CTEPH (rho=0.0938, p=0.761) or healthy control groups (rho=-0.220, p=0.313) (figure 3c).

As the ADAMT13 reduction in TTP has an autoimmune mechanism, we investigated whether anti-ADAMTS13 autoantibodies are increased in CTEPH. There was no

significant difference in anti-ADAMTS13 autoantibodies between CTEPH (92.3 ± 38.9%) and healthy controls (76.0 ± 16.5%; *p*=0.180) (supplementary figure S3).

We hypothesised that a decrease in ADAMTS13 antigen levels would result in reduced VWF cleavage and an increase in high multimeric VWF as occurs in TTP [28]. There was no difference in VWF multimeric size between CTEPH (VWF CBA:Ag ratio, 0.659 ± 0.537) and healthy controls (0.866 ± 0.494; *p*=0.160) (figure 3d).

Clinical phenotype associations with ADAMTS13 and VWF

In CTEPH, ADAMTS13 and VWF did not significantly correlate with markers of disease severity (6mwd, pulmonary vascular resistance or N-terminal pro b-type natriuretic peptide) (supplementary figure S4). Since inflammation has been associated with both CTEPH and abnormalities in the ADAMTS13-VWF axis we investigated if they were correlated [29, 30]. There were no correlations with blood markers of inflammation (C-reactive protein, white cell count, neutrophil and lymphocyte percentages) (supplementary figure S5).

***ABO* groups and ADAMTS13-VWF**

There was no difference in ADAMTS13 antigen levels when stratified by simple genetic *ABO* groups (O, A, B, AB) (figure 4a) (*p*=0.443) or more comprehensive genetic *ABO* groups (supplementary figure S6a) (*p*=0.616).

VWF levels did not vary by *ABO* groups (figure 4b and supplementary figure S6b) however, when accounting for covariates (supplementary table S6), *ABO* group B had a higher VWF level (β=+51.3 (5.30 to 117)%, p<0.001) compared to group O. *ABO* group A also had a higher VWF level, although this was not statistically significant (β=+19.8 (-1.75 to 46.1)%, p<0.073). Patients with *ABO* group O had the lowest VWF levels within the CTEPH group (14.5 ± 13.0μg/mL), which was still significantly higher than healthy controls (8.45 ± 8.77μg/mL, p<0.001).

There was no difference in ADAMTS13 antigen levels between *ABO* groups, when accounting for covariates with multivariable linear regression.

Protein quantitative trait loci for ADAMTS13

There were 5 SNPs in the *ADAMTS13* ± 40kb region that were significantly associated with ADAMTS13 protein in a multivariable linear regression model (supplementary table S7). The most significant SNP (rs3739893, risk allele C, β=-37.1 (-48.1 to -23.8)%, p=3.78x10^{-06}) is a 5' untranslated region (UTR) variant in the *C9orf96* gene, which is ~8kb 5' of the *ADAMTS13* gene. In a model adjusted for age, sex and batch, the lead SNP (rs3739893) explained 7.7% of the variance in ADAMTS13 levels within the CTEPH group (supplementary table S8). In the whole CTEPH GWAS, the effect allele frequency for rs3739893 in CTEPH cases (0.0128) and healthy controls (0.0158) was not significantly different, which suggests that it is not associated with CTEPH disease risk.

Discussion

This is the first study demonstrating a marked reduction in plasma levels of ADAMTS13 in CTEPH. This is independent of pulmonary hypertension, disease severity or systemic inflammation. We confirm that VWF is increased in CTEPH and implicate dysregulation of the ADAMTS13-VWF axis in CTEPH pathobiology.

The magnitude of ADAMTS13 reduction and VWF increase in CTEPH is greater than observed in studies of ischaemic stroke using the same methodology [23]. Furthermore, levels are lower in CTEPH than CAD when considering the proportion of patients in the lowest ADAMTS13 quartile (65% versus 28% respectively) [13]. Additionally, the combination of decreased ADAMTS13 and increased VWF has a synergistic effect on the odds of CTEPH that is greater than observed in CAD or ischaemic stroke [23]. The more pronounced ADAMTS13-VWF dysregulation in CTEPH may reflect the larger surface area of the vascular endothelium involved or alternatively that ADAMTS13-VWF dysregulation is more important in CTEPH pathobiology. Although ADAMTS13 is predominately produced by the liver, the contribution to plasma levels from vascular endothelial cells could be substantial given the large surface area of the lung vasculature [9]. A reciprocal relationship has previously been described between ADAMTS13 and VWF [31, 32]. The reduction in ADAMTS13 remained in our study when VWF levels were adjusted for, which is consistent with low ADAMTS13 being an independent risk factor in other thrombotic diseases [11].

Following pulmonary endarterectomy and removal of proximal thromboembolic material, the ADAMTS13-VWF axis remains dysregulated despite normalisation of haemodynamic parameters. Additionally, there is an equal perturbation of the axis in CTED, and no correlation with CTEPH disease severity, confirming the changes are not due to the presence of pulmonary hypertension or organised thrombus *per se*. Interestingly, there was no abnormality in ADAMTS13 levels in IPAH despite this group having a higher pulmonary vascular resistance, implying that distal pulmonary artery endothelial dysfunction and small vessel vasculopathy are not responsible [33]. Taken together, these observations demonstrate the dysregulation of the ADAMTS13-VWF axis in CTEPH pathogenesis.

Low ADAMTS13 could be driven by activation of fibrinolytic pathways and an increase in thrombin and/or plasmin, which have the potential to proteolytically inactivate ADAMTS13 [26]. D-dimer was raised in CTEPH though there was no correlation with ADAMTS13. High multimeric forms of VWF appear not to be increased in CTEPH. This is surprising, as increased high multimeric VWF occurs when ADAMTS13 is reduced in TTP and has been suggested to occur in ischaemic stroke and CAD [23, 28]. VWF multimeric size measured systemically may not reflect the local disease microenvironment in the pulmonary vascular endothelium. Additionally, the localised flow conditions that may be altered in CTEPH are important in VWF structure, cleavage by ADAMTS13 and thrombus resolution [34]. The increase in specific ADAMTS13

activity in CTEPH may reflect an increased conformational activation of ADAMTS13 by its substrate VWF, due to the altered ADAMTS13:VWF ratio [35].

The *ABO* gene is located in close proximity and modest linkage disequilibrium with the ADAMTS13 gene, raising the possibility that *ABO* may influence the ADAMTS13-VWF axis. ABO blood groups are associated with CTEPH with an over-representation of the non-O groups [20]. Genetic variation in *ABO* has also been associated with ischaemic stroke, coronary artery disease and venous thromboembolism [36, 37]. The proposed mechanism of this association has been via VWF plasma levels, which are 25% higher in non-O individuals [38]. We demonstrate that VWF is increased in some non-O groups within CTEPH however, VWF is still significantly higher in the CTEPH O group compared with healthy controls. This implies that there are additional contributing causes for the increased VWF in CTEPH. Conversely, *ABO* is a pleiotropic locus and may have alternative functional effects in CTEPH including mediating pathways involved in inflammation and angiogenesis [25].

We identified a protein qualitative trait loci (rs3739893) in the *C9orf96* gene (~8kb 5' of the *ADAMTS13* gene) that is associated with ADAMTS13 protein levels and has been described in two previous studies [18, 24]. In a GWAS of ADAMTS13 antigen levels in a healthy cohort, this SNP is significantly associated with a similar effect size (β = -22.3%). Whilst this confirms that ADAMTS13 protein is genetically regulated, this SNP only accounts for a modest variance of ~8% in ADAMTS13 protein levels and is not primarily associated with CTEPH disease risk.

A strength of this study is that we investigated the ADAMTS13-VWF axis in a spectrum of thromboembolic disease from acute PE to chronic thromboembolic disease with and without pulmonary hypertension. Our study contains a large sample of well characterised CTEPH patients that have been extensively phenotyped in an experienced national CTEPH centre. ADAMTS13-VWF imbalance does not occur in PE when assessed by multivariable regression, although we were underpowered to detect smaller effect sizes. This raises an intriguing possibility, that there are differences in the ADAMTS13-VWF axis in the spectrum of thromboembolic disease. Future studies using robustly phenotyped PE cohorts to ascertain the presence and extent of residual perfusion defects, should investigate if the ADAMTS13-VWF axis varies in post-PE syndrome. Clinical prediction scores for CTEPH following acute PE do not currently incorporate biomarkers [39]. Determining if dysregulation of the ADAMTS13-VWF axis precedes the development of chronic thromboembolic pathology could inform CTEPH risk stratification.

In summary, we report that the ADAMTS13-VWF axis is dysregulated in CTEPH and this is unrelated to pulmonary hypertension, disease severity or systemic inflammation. This implicates the ADAMTS13-VWF axis in CTEPH pathogenesis.

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Tables

TABLE 1

Baseline group characteristics

	Healthy control	CTEPH	CTED	IPAH	PE
Subjects	68	208	35	30	28
Age, Years	49 ± 24	64 ±19	58 ± 27	64 ± 27	52 ± 26
Sex, Female	32 (47)	90 (43)	9 (26)	21 (70)	15 (54)
Ethnicity, Caucasian	53 (78)	180 (95)	28 (88)	26 (90)	13 (54)
WHO functional class					
1		4 (2)	6 (18)	5 (17)	
2		42 (21)	17 (50)	4 (13)	
3		151 (74)	11 (32)	21 (70)	
4		7 (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	
6mwd, Metres		318 ± 176	366 ± 180	342 ± 244	
Pulmonary haemodynamics					
mPAP, mmHg		42 ± 18	21 ± 4	42 ± 17	
CI, L/min/m^2		2 ± 0.6	2.4 ± 0.6	1.7 ± 0.8	
PVR, dynes.s.cm^{-5}		639 ± 476	151 ± 71	808 ± 642	
Clinical blood tests					
Haemoglobin, g/L		140 ± 27	138 ± 16	142 ± 22	
Platelet count, x10^9		246 ± 82	200 ± 56	222 ± 77	
WCC, x10^9		7 ± 3	6.6 ± 2.1	6.9 ± 2.4	
Lymphocyte, %		25 ± 10	28 ± 13	18 ± 13	
Neutrophil, %		64 ± 14	59 ± 14	72 ± 14	

CRP, mg/L		5 ± 10	3 ± 3	3 ± 4	
NT-proBNP, pg/mL		592 ± 1576	113 ± 194	334 ± 695	
Smoking status					
Never		91 (47)	16 (50)	15 (52)	
Ex-smoker		87 (45)	13 (41)	11 (38)	
Current smoker		15 (8)	3 (9)	3 (10)	
Anticoagulation medication		137 (94)	15 (94)	30 (100)	

Data is presented as median ± interquartile range or number of patients (%). Percentages were calculated using the number of patients that data was available for as the denominator. 6mwd (6-minute walk distance), CI (cardiac index), mPAP (mean pulmonary arterial pressure), NT-proBNP (N-terminal pro b-type natriuretic peptide), PVR (pulmonary vascular resistance), WCC (white cell count).