The electrocardiogram of anaesthetized Southern Sea Lion (*Otaria flavescens*)
females

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Short Title: Electrocardiogram of anaesthetized Southern Sea Lions

Abstract

Objectives: The goal of this study was to characterize for the first time the electrocardiogram (ECG) of the southern sea lion (SSL) *Otaria flavescens*.

Animals, materials and methods: Thirteen wild SSL females were captured at Isla de Lobos (Uruguay) and anesthetized with isofluorane. ECG recording was performed on anaesthetized animals at ventral recumbence following standardized procedures.

Results: The ECG recordings showed normal sinus rhythm. Amplitude and duration of P and T waves, QRS complex, PR interval (PRi), QT interval (QTi) and ST segment (STs) were determined for all animals in all leads. QT corrected (QTc) was determined in lead II. P wave polarity was consistent among animals (positive in LI, LII, LIII and AVF leads and negative in AVL and AVR leads for all animals), but T wave polarity did not present any constant pattern among animals, being either positive, negative or biphasic in different leads and different animals. The PRi (0.15 ± 0.2 sec) was similar to the allometric prediction for most of mammalian species including humans. The STs were normal in 10 of the SSL but showed STs depression in 3 of the animals. Almost all animals had a negative electrical axis (-30 to -120°), with one exception that showed a positive electrical axis (120°). Mean eupneic heart rate (HR) was 104.61 ± 10.06 (range = 88-120) beats per minute (bpm).

Conclusions: This study was the first ECG description for this species, and provides valuable information for cardiac monitoring during anaesthesia.

44 **Keywords:** electrocardiography, pinnipeds, isofluorane anaesthesia, dive physiology.

45 **Abbreviations**

46 AV: Atrio-ventricular

47 ECG: Electrocardiogram

48 HR: Heart rate

49 PRi: P-R Interval

50 QT_i: Q-T Interval

51 QT_c: Corrected Q-T Interval

52 SSL: Southern sea lion

53 STs: S-T Segment

Introduction

Electrocardiographic (ECG) recording has been widely used in cardiac studies of terrestrial mammals. However, its use with marine mammals has been very limited and includes only four seal species¹⁻⁵, one otariid species⁶, two subspecies of manatees⁷ and six cetaceans species.⁸⁻¹³ Because of the logistical challenge of working with marine mammals in the wild, most of these studies have been conducted on captive animals or, in a few studies, used harpoon lead electrodes. The ECG recording in free ranging animals using less invasive techniques has become possible only recently, with the use of waterproof heart rate/ECG recorders attached to wild animals.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ Although these instruments are now allowing ECG recordings on more pinnipeds¹⁶ and cetaceans¹⁴, they use only two leads and do not enable four limb-leads ECG tracings precise enough to determine the normal range of values typically recorded in resting, terrestrial mammals.

The resulting low availability of aquatic mammal's ECG information has pointed out the application of ECG recording as a priority area of research in the cardiac physiology study of these species. In parallel to this scenario, and associated to current conservation issues affecting many worldwide extended populations of marine mammals, the study of their ecology and behaviour through the application of animal-borne technology (i.e. GPS or ARGOS satellite telemetry) have highly increased during the last decades.¹⁷ In consequence, it has also increased the need to anesthetize wild animals during the procedure of device attachment, which at the same time has prompted a need of reliable information of physiological parameters required for anaesthesia monitoring, such as the ECG range values.

The southern sea lion (SSL) *Otaria flavescens*, is a pinniped species that ranges and breeds throughout the coastal temperate waters of South America. Its annual cycle combines terrestrial periods for breeding and molting with at-sea foraging phases. It was heavily exploited, and despite receiving legal protection, many populations have never recovered from intense harvesting during the first half of the 20th century.^{18,19} Although its life history, ecology and physiology have been broadly studied, there are no previous studies of cardiac physiology and no ECG values have been yet published. In this context, the aim of the present study was to characterize the electrocardiogram of the SSL, determining temporal and amplitude values for all waves, intervals and segments. The study was focused on wild adult females, which constitutes a key component to be studied in decreasing populations. All animals used in the present study were captured in their natural environment, temporarily held in captivity and anesthetized with isofluorane. Results obtained here represented valuable information for comparative electrophysiology analysis in relation to other aquatic and terrestrial mammals including humans.

Materials and Methods

The study was performed during May 2010 on Isla de Lobos (35°01'S 54°52' W; Uruguay), which is located in the La Plata River Estuary and represents a significant portion of the world population for this species. Animal capture and handling was performed at the former sealing facility currently administered by the Uruguayan government (Dirección Nacional de Recursos Acuáticos de Uruguay, DINARA) following local and international ethic regulations for manipulation of wild animals (DINARA permit A/009/2006, Ministerial Resolution 001/1383/2007). Sea lions from this study were also used to deploy telemetry devices for foraging behaviour studies.²⁰

Thirteen wild southern sea lion females (body mass = 80.7 ± 27.9 kg; total length = 159.8 ± 17.5 cm) were captured by DINARA staff and held in a corral under veterinary observation for 24 h. Animals were physically restrained using a squeeze cage and anesthetized with isoflurane using a mask and later with an endotracheal tube.²¹ Mask anaesthesia induction lasted 14 ± 7 min (range = 7- 43 min) with a constant oxygen flow of $5-10 \text{ l min}^{-1}$ and 5% of isoflurane. After intubation, anaesthesia was maintained with $3-5 \text{ l min}^{-1}$ oxygen and an isoflurane concentration of 0.75-1.5 %. Total anaesthesia duration ranged between 0.5 and 2h. Anesthetized animals breathed constantly and regularly by themselves, but one assisted ventilation with a bag was performed every 5-7 min to expand the lungs, with particular care of not exceeding normal lung inflation. All physical signs, including head movement, jaw tone, palpebral reflex, eye position, iris appearance, respiratory character, and capillary refill, were monitored from the time of first approach. Once intubation was established, these physical signs

plus the electronic readings (veterinary monitor Guoteng) were monitored constantly by the anesthetist and recorded at 5 min intervals.

ECG recordings were performed in ventral recumbence with standard bipolar and unipolar limb leads (LI, LII, LIII, AVR, AVL and AVF).²²⁻²⁵ ECG recordings were performed 30 minutes after intubation, when animals reached a stable and profound anaesthetic stage. Limb leads were secured to the lateral aspect of the body wall using clip electrode as follows: the left and right forelimb leads were placed 5-7 cm cranial to the pectoral flippers insertion, approximately at the level of the scapular girth. The left and right hind leads were placed 5-7 cm cranial to the pelvic flippers insertion, approximately at the level of the pelvic girth.

Clip electrodes were manufactured in an appropriated size to clip sea lions peel (3.5 cm length, 1 cm opening width). Skin areas of electrode attachment were wetted with alcohol. ECGs were recorded using a portable device^f. The recording speed was 50 mm sec⁻¹ and the sensitivity set at 1cm = 1mV, using a 45 mm-wide paper. No filter was used during any recording. LII was additionally recorded at 25 mm sec⁻¹ to determinate heart rate (HR).

Amplitude in milivolts (mV) and duration in seconds (sec) of P and T waves, QRS complex, PRi, QT_i, and STs were measured as defined in standard clinical usage.^{22,24,26} Each measurement for each wave, complex, interval or segment was performed six times in every lead in each animal. All measurements were made manually using a calliper following standard clinical usage.^{22-24, 27}

The PRi was measured from the beginning of the P wave to the beginning of the QRS complex and compared to a predicted value estimated from sea lions body mass (BM) and the allometric equation proposed by Noujain et al.²⁸:

$$\text{Predicted } PRi = 53 \times BM^{0.24}$$

The QT_i was measured from the beginning of the Q wave to the end of the T wave. QT_i was corrected (QT_c) for heart rate using Bazett's formula.²⁹ The ST_s was measured between the end of the S wave and the beginning of the T wave. Following Bolton²² and Lightowler³⁰, the ST was considered abnormal when it displayed more than 0.2 mV below the baseline, an occurrence referred to as ST depression. HR in bpm was estimated from the LII recorded at 25 mm sec⁻¹ (small boxes between consecutive R waves divided by 3000). The mean electrical axis was determined using the isoelectric method by examining the QRS complexes in each of the six basic leads following standard procedure.^{22,24}

Mean, standard deviation (St. dev.), coefficient of variation (Coef. var.) and 95% confidence intervals were calculated for each measurement in every lead. The coefficient of variation was calculated as the ratio between the average and standard deviation, expressed as percentage. Statistic analyses were performed using PROC MEANS y PROC TTEST procedures of the statistic software SAS V9.2.³¹

Results

ECG recordings showed normal sinus rhythm in all animals (Fig. 1). Wave amplitudes were highly consistent for each animal in every lead. P wave polarity was highly consistent among animals: positive in LI, LII, LIII and AVF leads and negative in AVL and AVR leads for all animals. T wave polarity did not present a constant pattern among animals, being either positive, negative or biphasic in different leads and different animals.

The PRi ranged from 0.12 ± 0.06 to 0.18 ± 0.03 sec, with an overall value of 0.15 ± 0.02 sec for all animals. The predicted PRi was highly concordant (0.15 ± 0.01 sec), with minimal differences ranging from 0 (complete concordance between measured and predicted PRi) to a maximum of 0.03 sec. (average difference = 0.01 ± 0.01 sec.; data of measured and predicted PRi for each animal is available in Supplemental data on-line, Table A).

Amplitude of P, Q, R, S and T waves in LII were 0.38 ± 0.05 , 0.05 ± 0.07 , 0.59 ± 0.27 , 1.10 ± 0.28 and 0.56 ± 0.12 mV. respectively (mean and confidence intervals of amplitude measurements for each lead are available in Supplemental data on-line, Table B). Duration of P, T waves, QRS complex, QT interval and ST segment in lead II were 0.11 ± 0.01 , 0.11 ± 0.03 , 0.08 ± 0.01 , 0.31 ± 0.02 and 0.14 ± 0.02 sec. respectively (mean and confidence intervals of duration measurements for each lead are available in Supplemental data on-line, Table C). QTc was 0.41 ± 0.028 and the difference with QT_i was significant ($t = -0.095$, $P < 0.0001$). The STs were normal (no evident depression) in most of the sea lions studied ($n = 10$), but three exceptions were observed. Animals 1, 5 and 6 showed STs depression in LII and LIII (ST displayed more than 0.2 mV below the baseline; Fig. 2-a).

Almost all animals (n = 12) had a negative electrical axis ranging between -30 and -120°, with one exception (animal 11) with a positive electrical axis of 120° (electrical axis data for each animal is available in Supplemental data on-line, Table D). This animal also presented an unusual notched P wave (Fig. 2-b), with the highest amplitude of all records obtained (0.43 mV at LII), higher than the average obtained for all animals (0.38 ± 0.05 mV). Mean eupneic HR for anesthetized animals (n= 13) was 104.61 ± 10.06 bpm, ranging from 88 to 120 bpm (HR data for each animal is available in Supplemental data on-line, Table D).

Discussion

This study constitutes the first -and detailed- description of the anaesthetized SSL electrocardiogram. It resembled, in its essential details, that of man and other mammals. All animals showed normal sinus rhythm. All the waves of the ECG were detectable and could be easily separated. The SSL ECG characteristically displayed distinctly defined ST segment and QT interval, with a T wave clearly differentiated from the QRS complex. No polarity inversion were registered in any lead.

All animals showed P wave low voltage in LI, suggesting that atrial cardiac vector activation runs perpendicular to LI. We observed a consistent pattern of atrial depolarization for all leads in all ECGs. The only exception was the animal 11, which showed a notched P wave and the highest amplitude among all animals. This P wave morphology might be considered normal in the horse, where the right atrium depolarization precedes the left atrium and causes a biphasic P wave due to the large size of the atria. However, in other species like the dog, a biphasic P wave might be associated with left atrial enlargement.²² Although we cannot determine if sea lion 11 presented left atrium enlargement, the additional finding of a mean positive electrical axis (+120), different from that of the other animals which had a left cranial orientation of the mean electrical axis (-30° to -120°), might support this hypothesis. Similar to our results, Siegal-Willott et al.⁷ reported an occasionally biphasic P wave in the manatee, although its causes were not established.

The PRi represents the total amount of time required for both atrial depolarization and the delay in the atrio-ventricular node.²² The PRi of sea lions was almost invariable (0.15 ± 0.02 sec; Coef. var. =10.9 %), longer than the southern elephant seal (0.012 ± 0.02 sec⁵) and shorter

than the horse (0.28 ± 0.12 sec³⁰). In the latter, the PRi is usually long, variable and functionally prolonged by vagal influence. Sea lions' PRi resulted concordant with the predicted PRi (0.15 ± 0.01 sec) derived from the Noujaim's allometric equation²⁸, which was established with the largest set of published ECGs (33 species, including humans). This equation has an exponent within the range of scaling factors that describe the relation between body mass and many biological processes such as metabolic rate, life span and heart rate.^{28,32} Because it uses optimal heart function as its basis, the good correlation between measured and predicted PRi suggest that SSLs have a normal PRi in necessary of efficient cardiac function similar to other mammals including humans.

Due to its role as an indicator of the AV conduction time, the PRi can be considered as a valuable indicator of cardiac function efficiency. It is known that atrial contraction contributes to approximately 20% of the end diastolic volume after rapid ventricular filling.²³ This requires and adequate AV propagation of the electrical impulse that will trigger the ventricular contraction at the appropriate time, leading to a correct diastolic ventricular filling. Following this reasoning, and in concordance with predicted PRi (0.15 ± 0.01 sec) derived from the Noujaim's allometric equation²⁸, it is probably that AV conduction time in SSL works at an adequate timing to allow an efficient cardiac output.

The coordinated function of atrial and ventricular contraction is important in any mammal, but even more so in marine mammals that must precisely adjust cardiac function during breath-hold diving.³³⁻³⁶ This adjustment is part of the pulmonary and cardiovascular changes associated not only with the *dive response*, but also with its interaction with the *exercise response*. The *dive response* is associated with the cessation of breathing accompanied by a bradycardia, a reduction in cardiac output and a peripheral vasoconstriction that maintains

central arterial blood pressure while maintaining blood flow primarily to the heart, lungs, and brain.³³⁻³⁵ In contrast, the *exercise response* is associated with hyperventilation, tachycardia, cardiac output increase and peripheral vasodilatation to active muscles.^{16,36,37} Although the latter is the response typically exhibited by terrestrial mammals and birds that do not undergo in apnea during exercise, it appears to be integrated with the *dive response* in different phases of the dive.^{16,36-38}

The QRS complex represents the ventricular activation, which has been classified in Type A mammals (human, monkey dog, cat, rat), with three fronts of depolarization waves, and Type B mammals (horse, cow, pig, sheep and goat), with two wave fronts.^{30,39} A reliable classification of ventricular activation requires the description of cardiac anatomy and the characterization of the conduction system, which is not yet available in most marine mammals. However, Siegal-Willott et al.⁷ hypothesized that manatees have a depolarization similar to that of the horse and thus manatees should be classified as Type B. This inference was based on the only existing anatomical description and the predominantly positive deflection in LI. In the case of SSL, the conduction system has not been yet characterized and there is no heart anatomical description, so we cannot make similar assumptions. However, mean electrical axes reflected left and cranial orientation of the mean QRS vector in most of the SSL studied (n= 12), similar to northern elephant seals, southern elephant seals, harbour seals, pig and horses.⁴⁰ These similarities suggest that SSL might be classified as having a Type B activation, but further investigation is needed to elucidate this aspect.

The STs represents the end of ventricular activation, immediately before ventricle repolarization. Most of the SSL studied showed normal STs, but three exceptions were observed, showing clear patterns of STs depression. Although it is known that STs depression in humans

and dogs may result from several pathologies, including left ventricular hypertrophy, myocardial hypoxia or electrolyte disturbance ²², there was not enough evidence in this study to suggest these pathologies were present in the SSL with ST depression. In addition, T waves did not exhibit any polarity inversion within animals, which also suggests a normal mechanism of ventricle repolarization. The importance of this result relies in that reversal of T wave polarity is most often considered abnormal, and might indicate similar pathologies as those suggested by the STs depression. ²² Until further data is available, the STs depression might be considered as a normal occasional finding in the SSL ECG.

The QT_i includes both ventricular depolarization and repolarization. Because ventricular depolarization is short and constant, QT_i is used as a measurement of ventricular repolarization. The prolongation of the QT_i interval has clinical importance in the inhalation anaesthesia ⁴¹⁻⁴³. Several studies have shown that volatile anaesthetics prolonged the QT of the ECG during inhalational induction of anaesthesia. ^{43,44} On the other hand, long-QT syndrome, is similarly characterized by abnormal QT-interval prolongation on the ECG, accompanied by an increased risk of sudden death usually due to serious cardiac arrhythmias like ventricular fibrillation. ⁴⁴ Considering that no previous value of QT_i or QT_c has been reported for this species, no inference of potential abnormalities or isoflurane effects can be made for the animals in this study. However, average QT_i and QT_c values obtained in this study constitute a first approximation to the normal QT_i for the SSL, a value that must be compared with future ECG in awake resting SSL.

Conclusions

This study presents the first ECG description for the SSL, and provides valuable information for cardiac monitoring during anaesthesia. All the waves of the ECG were detectable and could be easily separated. The SSL electrocardiogram characteristically displayed distinctly defined ST segment and QT interval, with a T wave clearly differentiated from the QRS complex. The results obtained are novel and useful information for comparative electrophysiology analysis in relation to other aquatic and terrestrial mammals including humans.

Footnotes

^f RG-401 Plus, Cardiotécnica Argentina S.R.L and Biodesarrollos equipamiento médico.

Acknowledgments

We thank DINARA personnel, C. Barreiro, N. Veiga, L. Olivera, F. Area and M. Casella, for sea lions capturing. Anaesthesia was performed by DMVs Eduardo Mateos and Valeria Ruoppolo. We thank Dr. R.W. Davis, K. Mc Govern and G. Milano for useful comments on manuscript, DMVs Bruce Heath for guidance in fieldwork and data analysis and J. D’Imperio, E. Juri, M. Valdivia and S. Riverón for field work assistance. Funding for this project was provided by DINARA, Ministerio de Ganadería, Agricultura y Pesca del Uruguay (Resolución Ministerial 001/1383/2007; Expedientes DINARA No. 1136/2006, 503/2007 y 1378/2008), Agencia Nacional de Promoción Científica y Tecnológica of Argentina (Projects PICT 2007–01763), Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata, Argentina (Projects 15/E471 and 15/E335) and an NSF-CONICET Cooperation Grant (CONICET Resolution 1340/10). We thank Martín Barzizza, from *Biodesarrollos equipamiento médico* (<http://www.biodesarrollos-srl.com.ar/>) and *Cardiotécnica* (<http://www.cardiotecnica.com/>) and the Society for Marine Mammalogy (<http://www.marinemammalscience.org/>) grant for the ECG equipment.

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413 **Figure legends**

414 Figure 1. Typical ECG tracing in anesthetized Southern Sea Lions.

415 Figure 2. a) ECG of animal 1 in LII, showing an example of the ST segment depression observed
416 in three of the animals of the present study. b) ECG of animal 11 in LII, showing the atypical
417 notched P wave morphology.

Figure 1

Figure 2