



The role of robotics in cardiac surgery: a systematic review

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Received: 13 August 2018 / Accepted: 20 September 2018 / Published online: 25 September 2018
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Abstract

The application of robotic technologies in cardiac surgery has provided the possibility for minimally invasive access inside the thorax and avoidance of a median sternotomy. Given that current evidence seems promising, we sought to systematically review the existing literature regarding the efficacy, feasibility and mortality rate associated with robotic cardiac surgery. The PubMed and Cochrane bibliographical databases were thoroughly searched for the following MeSH terms: “robotic”, “cardiac surgery” and “heart surgery”. Original studies on robotic cardiac surgery in more than ten cases and reporting on the associated peri- or post-operative mortality were deemed eligible. Twenty-eight studies were included and provided data for 5993 patients with a mean age of 59.8 years. Approximately, one out of two patients (49.2%) underwent robotic CABG, while the other half (49.9%) underwent robotic MVR. Robotic atrial septal defect repair and atrial tumor resection were performed in a small proportion (0.9%) of the patients. Mean 30-day mortality was 0.7% ranging from 0 to 0.8% among the different types of surgery, while late mortality was 0.8% ranging from 0 to 1% with a mean follow-up period of 40.1 months. Our findings demonstrate that the application of robotics in cardiac surgery has provided a safe and efficacious alternative to the traditional techniques. However, more trials are necessary to elucidate all of its aspects.

Keywords Robotic cardiac surgery · Robotically assisted · Endoscopic

Electronic supplementary material The online version of this article (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11701-018-0875-5>) contains supplementary material, which is available to authorized users.

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Introduction

Conventional open cardiac surgery carries an increased operation risk and requires a large incision, long hospitalization and recovery time [1]. Minimally invasive approaches applied in cardiac surgery have been shown to significantly merit patients in terms of minimized surgical trauma, reduced need for analgesia and faster recovery [1]. Since its introduction in the late 1990s, robotic cardiac surgery has gained increased acceptance in a number of cardiac surgical procedures including coronary artery bypass grafting (CABG), mitral valve repair/replacement (MVR), cardiac tumor resection and atrial septal defect (ASD) closure [2].

Several studies have aimed to evaluate the safety and efficacy of robotic cardiac surgery. A recently published meta-analysis of 16 studies, which compared totally endoscopic coronary artery bypass (TECAB) and robotically assisted coronary artery bypass (RACAB) with conventional CABG showed that both minimally invasive techniques are safe and feasible [3]. Another systematic review of robotic mitral valve surgery by Seco et al. [4], concluded that the

application of robotics is a viable option for every type of mitral valve surgery and that it is associated with acceptable mortality rates (0–3%). Furthermore, a review of the robotic cardiac operations performed in Europe suggested a long-year experience with robotic CABG and a much shorter with robotic MVR, but with low peri-operative complications [2].

Cumulative evidence on the mortality rates associated with robotic cardiac surgery is still inconclusive. To that end, the objective of our study was to systematically review the existing literature for all types of robotic cardiac surgery and establish a comprehensive overview of the post-operative mortality associated with these novel surgical approaches.

Methods

Search strategy and eligibility of studies

The present systematic review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines and in line with the protocol agreed by all authors. PubMed and Cochrane bibliographic databases were thoroughly searched from January 1986 to February 2018 (last search: March 4th, 2018). Two investigators (I.D and E.S.) worked independently and executed the search using the following MeSH terms: “robotic”, “cardiac surgery” and “heart surgery”. A manual search of additional articles was conducted using references from relevant articles and review papers. Any discrepancies were resolved by consensus agreement by a third reviewer (MS).

Original clinical studies written in English on the applications of robotic surgery in cardiac surgery in more than ten cases and reporting on the associated peri- or post-operative mortality were included in the present study. Excluded studies met at least one of the following criteria: (1) papers published in a language other than English, (2) studies not showing mortality data explicitly for patients undergone robotic cardiac surgery (3) studies which included patients that solely underwent robotic ablation or resynchronization, (4) case reports, (5) experimental studies in animals, (6) studies in non-adults, (7) studies reporting on data from large-scale databases, (8) reviews and meta-analyses, (9) editorials and letters to the editor and (10) papers irrelevant to our study data, such as epidemiological data, anesthesia techniques, etc.

Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

Data extraction

Data were extracted regarding type of operation, robotic technique and surgical system used, country of origin, Newcastle–Ottawa Scale (NOS), study timeframe, number of patients who underwent cardiac robotic surgery, patient demographics [gender, age, body mass index (BMI)], patient comorbidities (such as known hypertension, diabetes mellitus, dyslipidemia) presence of angina, smoking status, history of myocardial infarction (MI), cerebrovascular disease, peripheral vascular disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), percutaneous primary coronary intervention (PCI), euroSCORE, presence of single or multi-vessel disease and pre-operative ejection fraction (EF). Peri-operative data such as urgency for operation, total operative time, ventilation time, cardiopulmonary bypass (CPB) time, crossclamp (XC) time, on-pump time, intensive care unit (ICU) stay and length of stay (LoS) were also extracted. Post-operative complications conversion, myocardial infarction (MI), cerebrovascular accident (CVA), atrial fibrillation (AF), bleeding, pneumonia, renal failure, infection, anastomotic stenosis, re-operation, late re-intervention and major adverse cardiac and cerebrovascular events (MACCE) were also noted down. Short-term mortality was defined as the mortality rate in the first 30 days after the operation, whereas long-term mortality referred to a period over 30 days after surgery.

Statistical analysis

The extracted data were incorporated into tables and analyzed regarding the type of operation, namely CABG (TECAB and non-TECAB), MVR and other (ASD repair and atrial myxoma resection). A cumulative analysis of the extracted data was also performed and a descriptive approach was adopted in all parameters. No further statistical analysis was attempted.

Results

Article selection algorithm and study characteristics

The literature search of both databases generated 1546 articles. The trial flow diagram, according to PRISMA guidelines, is presented in Fig. 1. Study characteristics and patient demographics are summarized in Table 1. In total, 28 studies were deemed eligible and provided data for 5993 patients who had undergone robotic cardiac surgery between 1996 and 2016. References of the studies are summarized in Supplemental Table 1. Ten studies [5–14] were

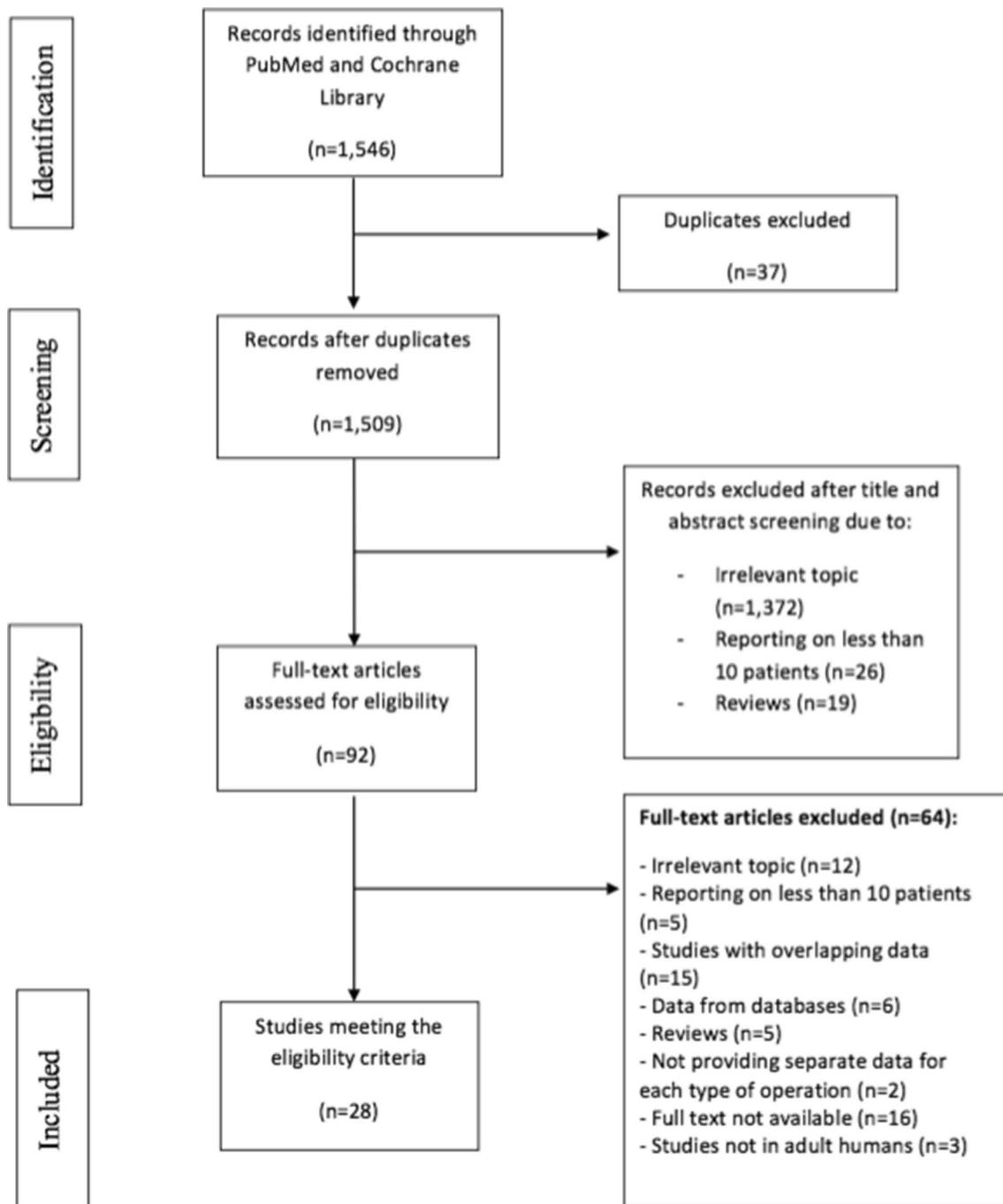


Fig. 1 Flowchart of the included studies according to PRISMA Statement. *PRISMA: Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses

conducted in Europe, six in the US [15–20], three in China [21–23], two in Canada [24, 25] and the rest in four other countries. DaVinci robot (included S and Si versions) was utilized in all cases except for the study of Giambruno et al. [25], in which Zeus and Automated Endoscopic System for Optical Positioning (AESOP) robotic

surgical systems were also used. The data extracted are presented with respect to the type of surgery performed. Major comorbidities per type of surgery are summarized in Table 2, peri-operative data in Table 3 and mortality data in Table 4.

Table 1 Study characteristics and patient demographics of the included studies according to type of surgery (CABG, MVR, other) as well as cumulative presentation of the data

Author	NOS stars	Study origin	Study period	Operation, <i>n</i> (%)		Method used	Robotic surgical system used	No of patients, <i>n</i>	Gender, <i>n</i>		Age (years)		BMI (kg/m ²)	
				Primary	Secondary				Male	Female	Mean	SD/R	Mean	SD/R
Tarola	6	Canada	12/2006–2008/2015	CABG	–	MINICAB	da Vinci	90	66	24	60.99	9.46	34% > 30	–
Yang	9	China	2007–2014	CABG	–	TECAB	da Vinci	100	84	16	58.7	8.6	25.2	2.6
Wiedeman	9	Austria/USA	2001–2011	CABG	–	MINICAB	da Vinci	140	103	37	59.3	9.7	25.9	2.1
de Canniere	7	Belgium/Germany	09/1998–2011/2002	CABG	–	TECAB	da Vinci	500	364	136	60	26–90	27	14–47
Dogan	6	Germany	06/1999–2002/2001	CABG	–	TECAB	da Vinci	45	32	13	63	6	–	–
Kappert	6	Germany	05/1999–2003/2000	CABG	–	MIDCAB	da Vinci	60	42	18	63.5	11.2	25.7	3.2
						TECAB	da Vinci	10	9	1	58.5	7.1	26.4	2.4
						REDCAB	da Vinci	25	19	6	63	8.6	25.9	4.1
Giambruno	7	Canada	02/1998–2002/2016	CABG	PCI (151/605)	RADCAB	AESOP, Zeus, da Vinci	605	455	150	61.2	10.7	36.2% > 30	–
Kofler	7	Austria/United Arab Emirates		CABG	–	TECAB	da Vinci	280	217	63	61	10	28	2.9
Roubelakis	8	Belgium	07/2002–2009/20015	CABG	PCI (11/44)	REMIDCAB	da Vinci Si	44	31	13	82.9	2.5	25.4	2.3
Hemli	7	USA	01/2010–2001/2011	CABG	–	MIDCAB (90/110), TEACB (20/110)	da Vinci	110	75	35	65	40–94	35% > 30	–
Bonatti	9	Austria/USA	06/2001–2006/2011	CABG	PCI (226/226)	TECAB	da Vinci	226	173	53	61	31–90	28	14–90
Jegaden	8	France	01/1998–2012/2008	CABG	–	PACAB	da Vinci	48	–	–	–	–	–	–
						MIDCAB	da Vinci	53	–	–	–	–	–	–
						TECAB	da Vinci	59	–	–	–	–	–	–
Sagbas	6	Turkey		CABG	–	SVST/MVST (mini-thoracotomy)	da Vinci	56	–	–	60.2	10.5	–	–

Table 1 (continued)

Author	NOS stars	Study origin	Study period	Operation, <i>n</i> (%)		Method used	Robotic surgical system used	No of patients, <i>n</i>	Gender, <i>n</i>		Age (years)		BMI (kg/m ²)	
				Primary	Secondary				Male	Female	Mean	SD/R	Mean	SD/R
Mishra	7	India	12/2002–2009/2006	CABG	–	TECAB (14/268), MIDCAB (193/268), THO-RACAB (61/268)	da Vinci	268	213	55	56.2	6.4	–	–
Kesavuori	9	Finland	05/2011–2012/2015	Robotically assisted MVR	–	Sub-total Non-TECAB TECAB	da Vinci Si	142	115	27	59	10.8	–	–
Gillinov	7	USA	01/2006–2011/2013	Robotically assisted MVR	–	–	da Vinci Si	1000	770	230	56	10	26	3.9
Navarra	7	Belgium	02/2012–2006/2016	Robotically assisted MVR	–	–	da Vinci Si	134	108	126	57.5	12	24.8	3.4
Kim	7	Korea	08/2007–2012/2015	Robotic MVR	–	–	da Vinci	310	201	109	48.4	13.7	24.3	3.8
Murphy	7	USA	01/2006–2012/2013	Robotic MVR	–	LEAR	da Vinci S	1257	675	582	59.3	20.5	26.2	5
Poffo	6	Brazil	03/2010–2012/2015	Robotic MVR	Annuloplasty (14/20), PFO Closure (4/20)	–	da Vinci	20	16	4	54.6	11.2	–	–
Folliguet	8	France	02/2004–2009/2005	Robotic MVR	–	–	da Vinci	25	16	9	59.4	11.2	–	–
Gao	6	China	01/2007–2003/2011	Robotically assisted MVR	–	–	da Vinci	22	9	13	44.7	9.8	–	–
Bhamidipati	6	USA	08/2004–2004/2008	Robotically assisted MVR	–	–	da Vinci	43	29	14	57.1	13.6	–	–
Tatooles	6	USA	10/2001–2010/2002	Robotically assisted MVR	–	–	da Vinci	25	18	7	56.4	37–81	–	–

Table 1 (continued)

Author	NOS stars	Study origin	Study period	Operation, n (%)		Method used	Robotic surgical system used	No of patients, n	Gender, n		Age (years)		BMI (kg/m ²)	
				Primary	Secondary				Male	Female	Mean	SD/R	Mean	SD/R
Autschbach	6	Germany	06/1996–2012/1999	Robotically assisted MVR	–	–	da Vinci	15	7	8	58	9	–	–
Gao	6	China	01/2007–2006/2009	Atrial myxoma resection	–	Sub-total	da Vinci S	2993	1964	1129	56.8	46	16	25.8
Boanros	6	Austria	03/2003–2012/2005	TEASD-R	–	–	da Vinci	17	3	14	35	16–55	–	–
Argenziano	6	USA	–	ASD/PFO	–	–	da Vinci	17	–	–	–	–	–	7.5
						Sub-total		83	3	14	47.3	–	–	–
						Total		5993	3850	1763	58	–	–	26.3

Titles of the columns and sub-totals of the extracted data are presented in bold

AESOP Automated Endoscopic System for Optimal Positioning, *ASD* Atrial septal defect, *CABG* Coronary artery bypass, *LA* Left atrial, *LEAR* Lateral endoscopic approach with robotics, *MIDCAB* Minimally invasive CABG, *MINICAB* mini-thoracotomy CABG, *MVR* Mitral valve replacement, *MVST* multiple vessel small thoracotomy, *NOS* Newcastle–Ottawa Scale, *PACAB* Port-Access CABG, *PCI* Percutaneous coronary intervention, *PFO* patent foramen ovale, *RADCAB* Robotically assisted CABG, *REDCAB* Robotically enhanced CABG, *REMICAB* Robotic enhanced minimally invasive direct, *SVST* single vessel small thoracotomy, *TEASD-R* totally endoscopic ASD repair, *TECAB* total endoscopic CABG, *THORACAB* Thoracotomy CABG

Table 2 Comorbidities of the eligible patients according to the type of surgery

Comorbidities, <i>n</i> (%) or mean (SD)	CABG			MVR	Other	Total
	non-TECAB	TECAB	Total			
Angina	114/140 (81.4%)	340/425 (80%)	621/943 (65.9%)	–	–	621/943 (65.9%)
Hypertension	107/274 (39%)	861/1151 (74.8%)	1075/1803 (59.6%)	1380/2911 (47.4%)	–	2455/4714 (52.1%)
Diabetes mellitus	565/879 (64.3%)	294/1151 (25.5%)	981/2408 (40.7%)	164/2929 (5.6%)	–	1144/5337 (21.4%)
Dyslipidemia	63/274 (23%)	839/1117 (75.1%)	902/1391 (64.8%)	46/203 (22.7%)	–	948/1594 (59.5%)
Smoking	70/184 (38%)	399/1151 (34.7%)	536/1603 (33.4%)	21/68 (30.8%)	–	557/1671 (33.3%)
CVD	86/879 (9.8%)	49/880 (5.6%)	151/1869 (8%)	109/2795 (3.9%)	–	260/4664 (5.6%)
PVD	59/739 (8%)	37/1051 (3.5%)	117/1887 (6.2%)	16/1231 (1.3%)	–	133/2418 (5.5%)
COPD	39/739 (5.3%)	122/825 (14.8%)	197/1942 (10.1%)	92/2556 (3.6%)	–	289/4498 (6.4%)
EuroSCORE	3.2	1.9	2.3	2.7	0.8	2.5
Pre-operative EF (%)	64.9	66.6	61.3	60.7	–	61
History of MI	44/274 (16%)	274/871 (31.5%)	359/1413 (25.4%)	17/1133 (1.5%)	–	375/2516 (14.9%)
Previous PCI	27/380 (7.1%)	421/1379 (30.5%)	486/1869 (26%)	5/417 (1.2%)	–	491/2286 (21.5%)
Single vessel disease	245/274 (89.4%)	794/1099 (72.3%)	1039/1373 (75.7%)	–	–	1039/1373 (75.7%)

CABG Coronary artery bypass, COPD Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, CVD Cerebrovascular disease, EF ejection fraction, MI Myocardial infarction, MVR Mitral valve repair, PCI Percutaneous coronary intervention, PVD peripheral vascular disease, SD standard deviation, TECAB totally endoscopic CABG

Table 3 Intraoperative and post-operative data and 30-day mortality of the included patients that underwent either type of robotic cardiac surgery

Peri-operative data	CABG			MVR	Other	Total
	non-TECAB	TECAB	Total			
Intraoperative data, <i>n</i> (%)						
Total operating time (min)	218	291.7	249.9	256.9	–	253.4
Ventilation time (h)	10.1	12.9	9.9	32.1	–	21.1
CPB time (min)	–	94.9	87.3	133.3	120.5	110.7
XC time (min)	38	67.5	61.3	90.5	48.5	75.7
On-pump, <i>n</i> (%)	1/44 (2.3%)	507/828 (61.2%)	508/872 (58.3%)	–	–	1009/1700 (59.4%)
Conversion to open, <i>n</i> (%)	63/980 (6.4%)	97/1099 (8.8%)	173/2442 (7%)	58/1234 (4.7%)	0	231/3676 (6.3%)
ICU stay (h)	30.2	27	28.5	29.8	24.5	29.1
LoS (days)	5.1	5.5	5.2	6.5	5.6	5.9
Post-operative data, <i>n</i> (%)						
Bleeding	15/980 (1.5%)	17/994 (1.7%)	38/2352 (1.6%)	50/2940 (1.7%)	0/33 (0)	88/5328 (1.7%)
MI	9/925 (1%)	21/1394 (1.5%)	30/2587 (1.2%)	9/2973 (0.3%)	0/33 (0)	39/5596 (0.7%)
AF	54/824 (6.6%)	80/1345 (5.9%)	134/2437 (5.5%)	373/2973 (12.5%)	0/33 (0)	507/5446 (9.3%)
CVA	11/925 (1.2%)	14/1404 (1%)	25/2597 (1%)	29/2950 (0.9%)	0/33 (0)	54/5613 (1%)
Pneumonia	7/925 (0.8%)	29/1404 (2%)	36/2707 (1.3%)	3/2930 (0.1%)	0/33 (0)	39/5703 (0.7%)
Renal failure	0/925 (0)	10/1404 (0.7%)	11/2707 (0.4%)	22/2930 (0.8%)	0/33 (0)	33/5703 (0.6%)
Infection	1/925 (0.1%)	5/1404 (0.4%)	7/2707 (0.3%)	17/2950 (0.6%)	0/33 (0)	24/5723 (0.4%)
Re-operation	13/925 (1.4%)	11/1404 (0.8%)	27/2707 (1%)	76/2950 (2.6%)	0/33 (0)	103/5723 (1.8%)
30-day mortality	3/1065 (0.3%)	14/1504 (0.9%)	18/2947 (0.6%)	26/2993 (0.8%)	0/53 (0)	44/5933 (0.7%)

AF Atrial fibrillation, CABG Coronary artery bypass, CPB Cardiopulmonary bypass, CVA Cerebrovascular accident, ICU intensive care unit, LoS length of stay, MI Myocardial infarction, MVR Mitral valve repair, TECAB totally endoscopic CABG, XC Crossclamp

Table 4 Follow-up data and late mortality of the patients that underwent robotic cardiac surgery regarding the type of surgery

Follow-up data	CABG			MVR	Other	Total
	non-TECAB	TECAB	Total			
Late mortality, <i>n</i> (%)	12/370 (3.2%)	33/1403 (2.4%)	26/2410 (1%)	6/1659 (0.4%)	0/19	32/4088 (0.8%)
Late re-intervention, <i>n</i> (%)	11/1065 (1%)	15/1177 (1.3%)	26/2510 (1%)	62/1915 (3.2%)	0/19	88/4444 (2%)
MACCE, <i>n</i> (%)	4/129 (3.1%)	168/1244 (13.5%)	181/1751 (10.3%)	36/382 (9.4%)	0/19	217/2152 (10%)
Follow-up duration (months)	30.1	38.3	36.6	43.5	–	40.1
Follow-up rate (%)	100	99.2	96.4	99.6	–	98

CABG Coronary artery bypass, MACCE major adverse cardiac and cerebrovascular events, MVR Mitral valve repair, TECAB totally endoscopic CABG

CABG

Major comorbidities

Cumulatively, 2947 patients underwent robotic CABG, of which, 1482 underwent TECAB and 1465 underwent non-TECAB. The majority of the patients were male (75.2%). Overall mean age was 59.5 years and BMI was 26.9 kg/m². Angina was present in 65.9% (621/943), dyslipidemia in 64.8% (902/1391), hypertension in 59.6% (1075/1803) and diabetes in 40.7% (981/2408) and of the patients. History of MI was present in 25.4% (359/1413), while 26% (486/1869) of the patients had undergone PCI. Mean EuroSCORE was 2.3, while data on Society of Thoracic Surgeons (STS) score, New York Heart Association (NYHA) score, Canadian Cardiovascular Society (CCS) grading of angina and left ventricular grade were insufficient. 75.7% (1039/1373) of the patients underwent CABG for single vessel disease and their EF was 61.3%.

Peri-operative data and clinical outcomes

Approximately, one out of two (58.3%, 508/872) operations was on-pump with a total operating time of 249.9 min, CPB time of 87.3 min, XC time of 61.3 min and ventilation time of 9.9 h. Mean ICU stay and LoS were 28.5 h and 5.2 days, respectively. Conversion to open surgery was the most common complication (7%, 173/2442) followed by atrial fibrillation (5.5%, 134/2437) and bleeding (2.3%, 42/1826), while the rate of MI, CVA, pneumonia, renal failure, infection, anastomotic stricture and re-operation was below 2%. 30-day mortality of the whole population was 0.6%, while late mortality (data drawn from 2041 patients) was 2.2%. In the subpopulation of the patients undergone TECAB, 30-day mortality was 0.9% (14/1504) and late mortality was 2.4% (33/1403). As far as the non-TECAB patients are concerned, 30-day and late mortality was 0.3% (3/1065) and 3.2% (12/370), respectively. Need for late re-intervention was prevalent in 1% (26/2410) of the patients,

while the rate of MACCE was 12.2% (181/1484), in a mean follow-up period of 36.6 months.

MVR

Major comorbidities

In total, 2993 patients underwent robotic MVR. Of them, 65.6% (1964/2993) were male, aged averagely 56.8 years and with a mean BMI of 25.8 kg/m². Most common comorbidities were hypertension (47.4%, 1380/2911) and dyslipidemia (22.7%, 46/203), while one out of three patients was a smoker (30.8%, 21/68). NYHA score was higher than II in 33.9% (892/2631) of the patients and the mean EuroSCORE was 2.7. Mean pre-operative EF was 60.7%. Data retrieved from 1636 patients showed that 77.8% of them had severe (grade 4) mitral regurgitation.

Peri-operative data and clinical outcomes

Total operative, CPB, XC and ventilation time were 256.9 min, 133.3 min, 90.5 min and 32.1 h, respectively. Average ICU stay was 29.8 h, while mean LoS was 6.5 days. Atrial fibrillation was the most common post-operative complication (12.5%, 373/2984), followed by conversion to open surgery (4.7%, 58/1234) and bleeding (1.7%, 50/2941). All other complications had a rate lower than 1%. 76 out of 2923 (2.6%) patients required re-operation, while late re-intervention was necessary in 3.2% (62/1938) of the cases. 30-day and late mortality were 0.8% (13/2993) and 0.4% (6/1659), respectively, while the incidence of MACCE during a follow-up period of 43.5 months, was 9.4% (36/383).

Atrial myxoma resection and atrial septal defect repair

Nineteen patients underwent robotic atrial tumor resection and 34 underwent robotic ASD repair. Cumulatively, 17.6% were male and the mean age was 40.8 years. All three studies reported on operative data exhibiting an average CPB time of 120.5 min and XC time of 48.5 min. ICU stay was

23 h and LoS was 8 days. There was no conversion to open surgery and no post-operative complication. No death was noted intraoperatively or within the first 30 days post-surgery in any of the studies, while only one study [23] with 100% survival rate reported on late mortality.

Comment

Cardiac surgery represents a field of surgery with technically demanding surgical procedures performed on high-risk patients. The need for minimizing the burden of the operation per se on the patient is imperative. The application of robotics may be promising in achieving enhanced results alongside with improved anesthetic monitoring and utilization of novel technologies [5]. Since the introduction of minimally invasive surgery to open heart procedures in 1995 [26], the use of robotic systems has gained acceptance from the surgical society [2]. According to the available data, robotic cardiac surgeries are most commonly performed in the case of CABG, MVR and in a much lower frequency for the resection of LA tumors and the repair of ASD, while cumulatively presenting both 30-day and late mortality rate lower than 1% with a mean follow-up period of 40.1 months.

A study by Yanagawa et al. [1], which reported on data obtained from the Nationwide Inpatient Sample (NIS) database, showed significantly reduced LoS, complications and mortality (1% in the case of robotically assisted cardiac surgery) in 5199 patients who underwent robotically assisted cardiac surgery compared with 10,331 propensity-matched patients who underwent non-robotic cardiac surgery. In another study by Deeba et al. [27], a European single-center experience in robotic surgery exhibited zero mortality in a registry of 102 cases.

CABG

Ever since the first TECAB performed by Loulmet et al. [28] using the first da Vinci® robotic system in 1998, the use of minimally invasive techniques has been widely spread as proposed by Whellan et al. [29]. In this study of the Society of Thoracic Surgeons Adult Cardiac Surgery Database (STS-ACSD) from 2006 to 2012, the authors have observed an increase in the volume of robotically assisted CABG, while no difference in peri-operative mortality was noted when compared with non-robotic CABG [29]. Additionally, a meta-analysis of 16 studies by Wang et al. [3], concluded that the utilization of robotics in CABG does not lead to increase in mortality, MACCE or need for re-intervention. Our results exhibit a 30-day mortality rate of 0.3% and 0.9% for non-TECAB and TECAB, respectively. However, as far as late mortality is concerned, the rate was 3.2% and 2.4% for non-TECAB and TECAB, respectively. It may be

assumed that the observed difference in the early mortality between the two techniques, albeit subtle, may be owed to the more space provided for surgical maneuvers in the case of non-TECAB technique. However, it is important to highlight that this difference was diminished long term, supporting the fact that both robotic techniques are feasible and efficacious. Only two studies [5, 8] reported 30-day mortality higher than 2%. In the first study, the participants were octogenarians with a mean age of 82.9 years, a fact that can merely justify the increased observed mortality [8]. Moreover, this was the study with the highest late mortality [8]. The authors of the second study reported a high conversion rate (28%) in their patient series, which may reflect their high-risk profile and the subsequent increased risk for mortality [5]. As far as MACCE are concerned, the two studies that reported the highest incidence were also the two with the longest follow-up period (5 years) [30, 31].

Apart from decreased mortality rates, application of robotic systems in CABG provides certain benefits. Thanks to its less invasive nature, robotic CABG is associated with a low rate of infection (0.3%) which is even more promising taken into consideration the fact that the mean BMI in all studies was higher than 25 kg/m² and that 40.7% of the included patients had diabetes, since these two parameters are known to be risk factors for wound infection post-operatively in traditional CABG [32]. The majority of the patients had single vessel disease, while only 24.3% of them had multiple vessel disease. In the study of Wiedeman et al., 33.2% of the patients had multiple vessel disease, however, the early mortality was as low as 1% [31]. Study timeframe was similar among studies and it ranged from 1998 to 2016, as such, differentiations in mortality in terms of the “age” of the studies were not detectable.

At this point it should also be mentioned that the patients had a low risk profile since both their EF and EuroSCORE were not deteriorated. When comparing intraoperative data between TECAB and non-TECAB, an increased operating, ventilation and XC time as well as rate of conversion to open surgery is noted in the case of TECAB, most probably due to the more challenging nature of this procedure. Yet, ICU stay and LoS did not seem to differ between the two surgical approaches, indicating that these intraoperative deviations did not alter the outcome.

MVR

Two decades after the first reported robotically assisted MVR [26, 33], a number of studies reporting on data of single-center experiences and national databases have established the efficacy and feasibility of this procedure [12, 34, 35]. Specifically, our results manifest that 30-day and late mortality were 0.8% and 0.4%, respectively. Only one of the eligible studies recruited patients before 2000, however, the

reported mortality was zero [13]. Two studies included more than 1000 patients and both exhibited a 30-day mortality rate lower than 1%, while only one of them presented data for late long-term mortality which was zero in a follow-up period of 38.3 months [16, 17]. Similar results were yielded by a systematic review of 16 studies including more than 50 patients undergoing robotic cardiac surgery, which showed that early mortality ranged between 0–3% while most of the included case series reported a mortality rate lower than 1% [4]. The introduction of da Vinci Si did not seem to ameliorate the surgical outcomes in terms of morbidity and mortality compared with the previous version of da Vinci, suggesting that latter has still a place in robotic surgical procedures for MVR. All studies that presented data for MACCE showed zero incidence [12, 19, 22] except for the study of Murphy et al. [17], in which a rate of 0.9% was noted. However, there are two main differentiations in this study compared with the others and these are the utilization of lateral endoscopic approach with robotics (LEAR) technique and the fact that the majority of the patients had III-IV NYHA score, while the reverse was noted in the rest of the studies. Moreover, it should be also mentioned that both CPB and XC time seemed to be much lower in this study [17].

Mean conversion to open surgery rate was less than 5%—even lower than that of robotic CABG—while the most common complication was AF. Incidence of post-operative AF was 12.5%, which is comparable with that of open surgery [36, 37], since the association of valve pathology and risk for AF is well-established [38]. Need for re-operation was present in 2.6% and bleeding in 1.7% of the cases. All other complications had a rate lower than 1%. Given that four out of five patients (77.8%) had severe MR, the cumulative survival was much greater than that observed in the literature in patients with severe ischemic MR undergoing open MV repair or replacement [39]. Peri-operative data such as CPB and XC time as well as ICU stay and LoS suggest the feasibility of this robotic procedure and the satisfying recovery of the patients. It should be mentioned though, that despite the increased severity of MR, two out of three (66.1%) patients had a I-II NYHA score, while the mean euroSCORE was relatively low (2.7, yet calculated only from two studies).

Other robotic procedures

Available data on robotic cardiac procedures, other than CABG and MVR, are limited and they come from case series. In our study, we present data from robotic atrial myxoma resection and ASD repair which advocate zero early mortality and post-operative complications. Data on late mortality and patients' comorbidities were not available in any of the studies. A retrospective analysis of the STS database conducted by Moss et al. [40] concluded that the utilization of robotics is feasible for LA cardiac tumor

resection and it is accompanied by lower blood loss and shorter ventilation time, ICU stay and LoS compared with non-robotic approach. We included one study [23] of LA myxoma robotic resection in our analysis, which exhibited similar ICU stay and LoS with those of the non-robotic arm of the study by Moss et al. [40]. Yet, in this study [23], 30-day mortality and surgical complications (including the need for conversion to open surgery) were zero.

The two other eligible studies referred to robotic ASD repair [14, 20]. Both studies reported on totally endoscopic robotic technique; however, CPB and XC time was much shorter in the study of Argenziano et al. [20]. Yet, it should be taken into account that the aim of the study by Bonaros et al. [14] was to evaluate the learning curve of the technique and its association with peri-operative outcomes. Thus said, the CPB and XC time noted towards the plateau of the learning curve are similar to those reported by Argenziano et al. [14, 20]. Both studies had similar ICU stay and LoS.

There are certain intrinsic limitations of our study that need to be considered prior to drawing conclusions. The presented data have been retrieved from a relatively large number of studies but no data from randomized control trials (RCTs) are available. In addition, the surgeons' fellowship training and the learning curve for robotic cardiac surgery was not separately evaluated in our analysis. Moreover, data concerning the general cost for application of robotic technology in cardiac surgery was not analyzed.

Although it is beyond the scope of this systematic review, it should be mentioned that the aforementioned cost derives from the price of the robotic system, the cost for its maintenance and its consumables parts and the cost for the training of the surgeons [1]. On the other hand, the optimal results offered by this method lead to decreased mortality and morbidity, a fact that should be also taken into consideration in terms of cost effectiveness. The initial high cost for obtaining a robotic system in combination with the need for expertise in this technique are the two main reasons why the data shown are mainly obtained from large centers specialized in this surgical technology.

The application of robotics in cardiac surgery is associated with low mortality and complication rates regardless of the type of the surgery, which are comparable or even lower than those of open surgery. There seems to be fertile ground for the utilization of robotic technology in the field of cardiac surgery (CABG, MVR, tumor resection and ASD repair), since it can offer the well-documented advantages of minimally invasive surgery with no extra "health cost" for the patient. However, further multicenter RCTs are needed to indisputably prove its efficacy and feasibility.

Funding None.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest IPD, ES, NM, DS, DP, MS, DIT, DM, DCI, AT, DD and NIN declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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