

# Targeting Bachmann’s bundle in hybrid ablation for long standing persistent atrial fibrillation: a proof of concept study

Giuseppe De Martino<sup>1</sup>, Giuseppe Nasso<sup>1</sup>, Alessio Gasperetti<sup>2</sup>, Marco Moscarelli<sup>1</sup>, Carmine Mancusi<sup>3</sup>, Giuseppe Della Ratta<sup>3</sup>, Claudia Calvanese<sup>3</sup>, Gianfranco Mitacchione<sup>4</sup>, Raffaele Bonifazi<sup>1</sup>, Nicola Di Bari<sup>3</sup>, Enrico Vassallo<sup>3</sup>, Marco Schiavone<sup>4</sup>, Marco Gaudino<sup>5</sup>, Giovanni Battista Forleo<sup>6</sup>, and Giuseppe Speziale<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Anthea Hospital

<sup>2</sup>IRCCS Centro Cardiologico Monzino

<sup>3</sup>Clinica Mediterranea

<sup>4</sup>Luigi Sacco University Hospital

<sup>5</sup>Weill Cornell Medical College

<sup>6</sup>Ospedale Luigi Sacco-Polo Universitario

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## Abstract

**Introduction.** Catheter-based or surgical procedures in patients with long-standing persistent atrial fibrillation (LSPAF) remain a challenge. As a result, different approaches including hybrid (surgical and endocardial) ablation have been developed. Bachmann’s bundle (BB) is a mainly epicardial structure capable of sustaining arrhythmic reentry that could be involved in the development and perpetuation of atrial fibrillation. We investigated the efficacy and safety of an adjunctive BB ablation in LSPAF patients undergoing hybrid ablation. **Methods.** In a two arm non randomized study, consecutive LSPAF patients undergoing epicardial isolation of pulmonary veins with left atrial posterior wall (box-lesion) with (n=30, BB-group) and without additional BB ablation (n=30, CONV-group) were enrolled in the study. All patients underwent an endocardial procedure within 6 weeks post-surgery to assess for potential lesion gaps and additional atrial substrate modification. The primary endpoint was freedom from AF through 12 months of follow-up. **Results.** The two-staged hybrid ablation was successfully completed in all patients. One-year freedom from atrial arrhythmias recurrence rates was 96.6% in the BB group vs 76.6% in the CONV group (p=0.025). At procedure completion, 30 (100%) and 17 (56%) patients had a spontaneous cardioversion in BB and CONV group respectively (p < 0.001). No significant differences in quality of life or complication rates were observed. **Conclusions.** This initial experience shows, for the first time, that adjunctive BB ablation in the setting of hybrid ablation for LSPAF is a feasible and effective approach in increasing maintenance of sinus rhythm without increasing complication rates.

## Targeting Bachmann’s bundle in hybrid ablation for long standing persistent atrial fibrillation: a proof of concept study

### Bachmann’s bundle ablation in persistent atrial fibrillation

Giuseppe De Martino MD, PhD<sup>1-2</sup>, Giuseppe Nasso MD<sup>1</sup>, Alessio Gasperetti MD<sup>3</sup>, Marco Moscarelli MD<sup>1</sup>, Carmine Mancusi MD<sup>2</sup>, Giuseppe Della Ratta MD<sup>2</sup>, Claudia Calvanese MD<sup>2</sup>, Gianfranco Mitacchione MD, PhD<sup>3</sup>, Raffaele Bonifazi MD<sup>1</sup>, Nicola Di Bari MD<sup>2</sup>, Enrico Vassallo MD<sup>2</sup>, Marco Schiavone MD<sup>3</sup>, Mario Gaudino MD<sup>4</sup>, Giovanni B Forleo, MD, PhD<sup>3</sup>, Giuseppe Speziale MD<sup>1</sup>.

*Drs. De Martino and Nasso contributed equally as first authors.*

## Affiliations:

<sup>1</sup> Anthea Hospital, Bari, IT

<sup>2</sup> Clinica Mediterranea, Naples, IT

<sup>3</sup> Ospedale Luigi Sacco – Polo Universitario, Milan, IT

<sup>4</sup> Weill-Cornell Medical College, New York, US.

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**Address for Correspondence** . Giovanni B Forleo, MD, PhD. Azienda Ospedaliera, Polo Universitario, "Luigi Sacco". Via G.B. Grassi 74. 20157. Milano, Italy. Office: +39023904 2789 - email:forleo@me.com

## STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

**Introduction** . Catheter-based or surgical procedures in patients with long-standing persistent atrial fibrillation (LSPAF) remain a challenge. As a result, different approaches including hybrid (surgical and endocardial) ablation have been developed. Bachmann's bundle (BB) is a mainly epicardial structure capable of sustaining arrhythmic reentry that could be involved in the development and perpetuation of atrial fibrillation. We investigated the efficacy and safety of an adjunctive BB ablation in LSPAF patients undergoing hybrid ablation.

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**Conclusions.** This initial experience shows, for the first time, that adjunctive BB ablation in the setting of hybrid ablation for LSPAF is a feasible and effective approach in increasing maintenance of sinus rhythm without increasing complication rates.

**Key words:** atrial fibrillation ablation; long-standing persistent atrial fibrillation; hybrid ablation; Bachmann's bundle; posterior wall isolation.

## INTRODUCTION

Patients with long-standing persistent atrial fibrillation (LSPAF) represent a major challenge for both cardiologist and cardiac surgeons(1). Despite continuous improvements, catheter-based procedures have shown poor outcomes and may need repeated transcatheter procedure to achieve sinus rhythm(2). Surgical minimally invasive approach combining a surgical epicardial and a transcatheter endocardial ablation has emerged as alternative treatment, with encouraging results(3-5).

Electrical isolation of the left atrial posterior wall ('box lesion') represents the target of the epicardial approaches. Nevertheless, other cardiac structures outside the posterior wall might play a role in the atrial fibrillation (AF) genesis, i.e. the ligament of Marshall, the left atrial appendage or the superior vena cava.

Bachmann's bundle (BB) is a muscular structure comprising of parallel-aligned myocardial strands, connecting the right and left atrial wall. It represents the main pathway of inter-atrial conduction and its disruption may result in various atrial tachyarrhythmias. Surgical isolation of the BB does not require additional blunt dissection since, during an epicardial approach, it is easily accessible just beneath the descending aorta. BB

may be involved in the pathogenesis and sustaining of a number of unstable re-entrant circuits and it has been hypothesized that its isolation could prevent induction of stable AF(6–8).

Aim of this study was to explore the feasibility, effectiveness, and safety of adding BB ablation to a pre-terminated right- and left atrial lesion set, in the setting of a two-staged hybrid ablative approach as first line strategy in LSPAF.

## METHODS

### Study Population

From September 2016 to April 2017, 60 consecutive patients underwent two-staged hybrid ablation at Anthea Hospital, GVM Care&Research, Bari, Italy and were followed-up for 1 year to monitor recurrences. Patients were included on the basis of the following criteria: (A) symptomatic LSPAF as defined by current guidelines(9), (B) AF refractory to the maximal tolerated doses of antiarrhythmic therapy, and (C) at least 1 failed electrical or pharmacologic cardioversion attempt during the 6 months preceding the surgical evaluation. Left atrial dimension indexed to body surface area exceeding  $35 \text{ mm/m}^2$  was considered an exclusion criterion.

The study was designed as a two-arm non randomized interventional study.

All enrolled patients underwent epicardial isolation of the pulmonary veins and of the left atrial posterior wall (“box lesion”). In the interventional cohort (BB group, 30 patients), additional surgical ablations targeting the BB was performed. For comparison, BB group patients’ outcomes were compared with the conventional cohort (CONV group) comprising 30 consecutive patients who underwent the same surgical lesions without BB ablation.

All patients underwent a staged endocardial ablation within 6 weeks after the surgical procedure with the goal of verifying or ablating: (A) the surgical lines and completing the isolation if needed, (B) additional right and left atrial substrate modification and (C) other triggers of AF. Each ablation strategy was performed by the same operators in both groups. All procedures were performed by expert operators, with >10 years of experience both parts of the staged procedure, to correct for a potential learning curve effect. GVM Care&Research ethical board approved the study and all patients gave written informed consent for procedure and study enrollment.

### Epicardial approach

All patients were required to be on oral anticoagulant therapy for at least four weeks before the scheduled surgery and were asked to withdraw oral anticoagulation therapy 3 days before the procedure. Enoxaparin sodium (100 IU/kg twice daily) was administered until the evening before surgery. Oral anticoagulant therapy was recommenced the day following surgery.

#### a) *Surgical box lesion:*

A circumferential lesion set was delivered anterior to the PVs in an attempt to isolate the PVs and posterior left atrium (Box lesion set) according to a previously described approach(4). Briefly, after general anesthesia, transesophageal echocardiography was performed to rule out an atrial thrombus before surgery. A 3-4 cm right minithoracotomy was performed at the 3rd intercostal space level and a soft-tissue retractor was applied. Thoracoscopic camera was used in all the cases, and the pericardium was opened above the right phrenic nerve. The oblique sinus was entered through blunt dissection. The Estech COBRA Fusion 150 Surgical Ablation System (Estech, San Ramon, Calif) was used in all the patients.

The introducer with the magnetic tip was pushed into the transverse sinus until the left atrial appendage was passed. The second introducer was then advanced into the oblique sinus until its tip hinged the first introducer. Care was taken to avoid lesion of the atrial appendage and pulmonary veins were encircled with the ablation probe. The device used suction to stabilize the contact with the epicardium and achieve uniform energy delivery. A circular box lesion was created with bipolar and unipolar radiofrequency energy.

Different patterns of energy delivery are available with the device used; in our series, ablation was performed by 2 energy applications lasting 150 seconds each. These were followed by a 60-second application after the probe was moved circumferentially, to achieve complete closure of the box lesion. All the cases were performed off-pump. After the probe was withdrawn, efficacy assessment was usually done by measurement of conduction across the lesion. Conduction block was routinely tested for by recording signals from the posterior wall of the left atrium; if conduction block was not present, additional lesions were delivered. Chest was closed after hemostasis and insertion of a drain.

#### b) *Bachmann's bundle ablation*

An adjunctive BB ablation was performed in the BB group. Bachmann bundle was ablated by introducing the magnetic tip below the ascending aorta and above the roof of the left atrium, and then advanced until the base left atrial appendage. No further dissection was required. The ablation line goes from the left to the right atrial appendage behind the non-coronary aortic sinus and efficacy assessment was done by measurement of conduction across the line (Figure 1).

As for the box lesion, the second introducer was advanced into the oblique sinus until its tip hinged the first introducer. Ablation was performed with 2 energy bipolar and unipolar applications, each lasting 150 seconds.

### Endocardial ablation

Catheter ablation was performed 2 to 6 weeks after the surgical procedure. All patients received the procedure under general anesthesia and esophageal temperature monitoring with a dedicated tripolar catheter (Esotherm, Fiab). Heparin boluses were administered to achieve an activated coagulation time above 300 seconds. Mapping and ablation were performed using an electroanatomic mapping system (Carto, Biosense Webster, Diamond Bar, CA, USA). A detailed bipolar voltage map of the left atrium was obtained. All points were acquired point-by-point using the ablation catheter to ensure adequate catheter tissue contact by contact force (8-10g). Radiofrequency was applied using an open irrigated tip catheter with power output up to 35 W in the posterior wall and up to 45 W in the remaining atrial sites (Figure 2).

Entrance block was defined by complete elimination, or dissociation of pulmonary vein (PV) potentials, determined by the circular mapping catheter positioned in the pulmonary veins and posterior wall. Endocardial ablation was first directed to possible gaps in the surgical lesions. Finally, the procedure was completed with: a) ablation of the Marshall ligament; b) roof and anterior mitral lines; c) coronary sinus and superior vena cava isolation d) inter-caval ad cavo-tricuspid isthmus. After restoration of sinus rhythm, linear lesions were assessed for bi-directional block with further ablation performed as required to achieve block. High rate pacing, with a cycle length up to atrial effective refractory period for at least 10 seconds, was used to induce atrial arrhythmias and ablation of all the residual atrial arrhythmias was performed.

### Follow up

Oral anticoagulation was resumed on the evening after the surgical procedure and was not discontinued during the endocardial procedure.

At discharge, patients received an ECG recorder (PM 100 Eumaco or Cardio B Gima) and were instructed to obtain a 30-s ECG once a day and a further ECG record in case of symptomatic palpitations. Information from internal loop recorders was available in 6 patients.

The follow-up visits were scheduled at 3, 6 and 12 months in our center. Visits consist of 12-lead ECG, 24-hour Holter, transthoracic echocardiography and physical examination. Oral anticoagulants were discontinued according to the CHA<sub>2</sub>DS<sub>2</sub>-VASc score after a minimum of 3 months. Antiarrhythmic therapy was reassessed at first follow up visit, and discontinued within 6 months of ablation in the absence of AF recurrences.

Functional New York Heart Association (NYHA) class and quality of life was assessed before surgery and at last follow-up (1-year) by administration the EQ visual analogue scale (EQ VAS) for quantitative analysis ([www.euroqol.org](http://www.euroqol.org)).



## Endpoints

Efficacy endpoint was freedom from AF or other supraventricular arrhythmias (lasting >30 seconds) at 1-year follow-up. Because early recurrences of AF may be a transient phenomenon, a 3-months blanking period was used. Safety endpoints were incidence of mortality, morbidity or other procedure-related complications.

## Statistical Analysis

Continuous data are presented as mean  $\pm$  standard deviation (SD) or as median (interquartile range). Categorical data are summarized using absolute values (percentage). Continuous variables were tested for normal distribution with the Shapiro-Wilk test. Non-continuous variables expressed as proportions were compared with using  $\chi^2$  analysis or Fisher's exact test, as appropriate. Intergroup comparisons were performed using a the 2-tailed Student t test (continuous variables) or the  $\chi^2$  test/Fisher test (categorical variables) for unpaired data. Paired non-parametric exact methods were used to compare the change in QoL over time for each patient. Long-term survival was described with the Kaplan–Meier method, and comparisons were made by use of the log-rank statistic. All P-values were two-sided, with a P-value of  $< 0.05$  was considered to indicate statistical significance.

## RESULTS

### Baseline characteristics

A total of 60 consecutive patients with symptomatic long-standing persistent AF referred for hybrid ablation were included in the study, with 30 patients per arm. Baseline demographics and clinical characteristics are reported in Table 1 and presented no significant inter-group difference.

### Epicardial ablation

The surgical ablation was performed with a mean operative time of  $101.3 \pm 25.7$  minutes. In the BB group, Bachmann's bundle ablation was performed in all patients. At the end of the epicardial ablation, 56 patients (93.3%) needed electrical cardioversion for sinus rhythm restoration, 27/30 (90%) in the Bachmann's group and 29 (96.6%) in the conventional group ( $p=NS$ ).

Mean hospital stay was  $8 \pm 3$  days, with no differences between the two groups. Twenty-three patients (38%) were discharged in sinus rhythm and anti-arrhythmic drugs (AADs) were administered in all patients: 52 (86.7%) were treated with amiodarone and 8 (13.3%) with flecainide.

Post-operative complications (i.e., within 30 postoperative days) are reported in Table 2. One patient (BB group) had a serious bleeding requiring surgical revision; the source was identified at the level of the chest drain site insertion. One patient (CONV group) had delirium 1 day after surgery, with a normal brain CT. Two patients (3.3%), one per group, had pneumothorax, with a need for drainage. Two patients (3.3%), one per group, developed superficial wound dehiscence. Right phrenic nerve paresis was observed in 3 patients in the BB group (10.0%) and 2 in the CONV group (6.6%) ( $p=NS$ ). Four of these patients had complete regression of phrenic nerve function after a maximum of 5 months. No patient required sternotomy and no significant differences in serious postoperative complications were observed between groups.

### Endocardial ablation

All patients underwent an endocardial catheter ablation as second step procedure, after a median time from surgery of 34 [IQR] days. At the time of endocardial ablation, 26 (43%) patients were in sinus rhythm, 27 (45%) in AF and 7 (12%) patients in atypical atrial flutter. No significant differences in rhythm type at endocardial ablation presentation were observed between the two groups.

At the beginning of the endocardial procedure, complete isolation of the posterior LA wall was observed in 22 (36%) patients ( $n = 10$  in BB group,  $n = 12$  in conventional group ( $P=NS$ )). Achievement of electrical box isolation required endocardial ablation of the septal aspect of the box in 14/38 patients (36%); of the roof of the box in 12/38 patients (31%); of the lateral aspect of the box in 23/38 patients (60%); of the

inferior aspect of the box in 32/38 patients (84%). After the box lesion spontaneous restoration of the sinus rhythm occurred in 2 patients of the Bachmann's group.

A bidirectional conduction block across the mitral isthmus line was achieved in all patients in the Bachmann's group compared with 21 patients (70%) in the conventional group ( $P=0.039$ ). All patients received ablation of the ligament of Marshall, coronary sinus septal inter-caval, cavo-tricuspidal isthmus and superior vena cava isolation. Finally, 3 patients in Bachmann's group and 2 patients in conventional group received additional ablations for focal atrial arrhythmias.

Total duration of the endocardial ablation was ( $126\pm 42$  min) in BB group vs 143 ( $\pm 39$ min) in the CONV group ( $p = \text{NS}$ ). Average hospital stay resulted 2.6 days in BB group vs 2.5 days for the CONV group ( $p = \text{NS}$ ). During endocardial ablation, a spontaneous restoration of sinus rhythm was observed in all patients ( $n=16$ ) in the BB group versus 5 patients (28%) in the CONV group ( $p<0.001$ ). Patients in the CONV group still presenting AF ( $n=9$ ) or atrial flutter ( $n=4$ ) were successfully converted to sinus rhythm by electrical cardioversion.

After completion of endocardial ablation, incremental atrial pacing was conducted to test arrhythmia inducibility. Sustained atrial arrhythmias (lasting  $>30$  seconds) were observed in 1/30 patients in the Bachmann's group (3.6%), versus in 19/30 patients (64.4%) in the CONV group ( $P= 0.0025$ ). No major complications were recorded during the endocardial procedures. Three patients showed modest groin hematoma that non required intervention or transfusion.

### Follow-up

After the two-stage ablations, all patients were discharged in sinus rhythm. No patient was lost during follow-up and all patients completed the 1-year follow-up. Four patients ( $n = 1$  in BB group;  $n = 3$  in CONV group) experienced early recurrences within the blanking period ( $<3$  months). The 1-year success rate free of AAD was 96.6% in BB Group and 76.6% in the CONV group ( $p=0.025$ ). A Kaplan–Meier curve of arrhythmia-free survival for both groups was reported in Figure 3. No deaths or thromboembolic events were recorded.

Quality of life questionnaire EQ-5D-3L was obtained from all patients. There was no statistically significant difference between groups (suppl. material).

## DISCUSSION

Although various ablative strategies have been designed over the last years, the success rate of catheter ablation in patients with LSPAF remains low, with wide variations in ablation techniques among operators. Increasing evidence suggests that the hybrid approach could represent a more aggressive, but greatly effective treatment for such patients(10).

The current report is the first study to date describing the adjunctive role of BB ablation in patients with LSPAF refractory to medical therapy. It resulted in the following important findings: (A) Bachmann's bundle ablation in the setting of a two-staged hybrid ablation is safe and highly effective with 96% of patients being arrhythmia-free at 12-months, off AADs and without a need for re-ablation. (B) Adding this surgical ablation target, where the BB is supposed to be anatomically located, was easy to perform without significant increase in procedural time and did not require further blunt dissection. (C) BB ablation does not increase the risk of periprocedural complications.

The 12-month success rate observed in the CONV group is consistent with prior reports. Muneretto et al. reported an 88% success rate at 1 year and in the past the same group described a 90% success rate with a sequential-staged approach(4, 11). Kress et al. achieved an AF-free survival of 72% at median follow-up of 16 months(12). Other authors(13, 14) achieved sinus rhythm in over 80% of the patients and resulted in substantial left atrial and left ventricular reverse remodeling, improvement in the ejection fraction, functional status, and even a decrease in the NT-pro BNP serum levels after twelve months.

It is noteworthy that adjunctive BB ablation resulted in 96% of the patients being arrhythmia-free, off AADs and without a need for re-ablation. Bachman's bundle may be involved in a number of unstable re-

entrant circuits and it has been hypothesized that an effective lesion of the BB would prevent induction and maintenance of AF. Structural changes of BB may cause longitudinal dissociation of adjacent muscle fibers, facilitating re-entry and hence the development of AF(6). In addition, BB ablation implies a greater amount of ablated tissue reducing the critical mass necessary to sustain AF and may eliminate “driver tachycardias” and arrhythmogenic foci outside the pulmonary veins.

Notably, no complications were specifically attributable to the adjunctive BB ablation. We found a significant difference between the two groups in spontaneous conversion to sinus rhythm during the staged endocardial ablation and in terms of subsequent arrhythmia inducibility. In the BB group, all patients converted to sinus rhythm during the endocardial ablation and none needed cardioversion. This represents a major finding if we consider that only 5 patients in the conventional group converted to sinus rhythm during the ablation while 13 patients needed electrical cardioversion. Differences in inducibility rate between groups were even more impressive, especially considering the aggressive protocol of induction used in our study: only one patient remained inducible in the BB group compared to 19/30 patients in the conventional groups. These observations suggest that BB plays a major role in the perpetuation of atrial fibrillation and should prompt to include the ablation of BB in the ablation schemes used for LSPAF.

In 7 patients of the CONV group, mitral isthmus line was not successfully completed after catheter ablation. One of them had AF recurrence, however, this number was too small for any meaningful conclusion. Leftward extensions of the BB bifurcate to pass to either side of the left atrial appendages: it is our opinion that BB ablation could have facilitated in some way the mitral isthmus block obtained in all patients of the BB group.

## Limitations

This is a single-center nonrandomized study and has the inherent limitations of this design, matching our scope of a first-in-man feasibility and effectiveness report. Despite the small number of patients enrolled, the study was sufficient to observe significant differences in arrhythmic outcomes between groups. Furthermore, the small sample size might account for the failure to detect differences between groups in all the QoL scores.

We may also have underestimated the recurrence rate because of asymptomatic undocumented arrhythmia episodes. However, many prior studies of AF ablation have not systematically looked for asymptomatic episodes of recurrent atrial fibrillation on a daily basis. Finally, percutaneous ablation was performed 2 to 6 weeks after the surgical approach, and in some cases full ‘maturation’ of the surgical scars may had not happened.

## Conclusions

Bachmann’s bundle ablation in the setting of a two-staged hybrid ablation is a safe and highly effective first-line treatment for patients with long-standing persistent AF, with 96% of patients being arrhythmia-free 1 year after the procedure. Pending further trials with a longer and continuous follow-up, this study suggests the major role of BB in the substrate maintaining LSPAF even after an extensive biatrial ablation.

## Acknowledgement

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## FIGURE TITLES AND LEGENDS

### Figure 1

Panels A-B. Intraoperative view of the magnetic tip of Estech COBRA Fusion 150 Surgical Ablation System passing below the ascending aorta. See text for further details.

Panel C. Pictured here is a heart with some dissection that reveal the anatomic layout of Bachmann’s bundle stretching across the interatrial groove.

AAo: ascending aorta; RAA: right atrial appendage; LAA: left atrial appendage; AV: aortic valve; PA: pulmonary artery.

### Figure 2

Example of a 3D bipolar voltage map (CARTO picture/posteroanterior view) obtained with multielectrode catheter and ablation catheter. Regions in purple represent normal myocardium, other colored regions represent low-voltage areas (voltage cutoff: 0.05–0.5 mV).

(A) Substrate map obtained before RF ablation shows the surgical lesion set.

(B) Post-RF ablation map of the same patient shows wide area antral PV ablation and concomitant isolation of the posterior left atrial wall.

### Figure 3

Kaplan-Meier estimates of AF recurrence-free survival. AF episodes within 3 months after were excluded from the analysis. Freedom from AF was significantly higher in BB group.

AF=Atrial fibrillation. BB= Bachman Bundle

**Table 1. Baseline characteristics**

Age, y/o (IQR)
Female, n (%)
BSA, m <sup>2</sup> (SD)
Hypertension, n (%)
NIDDM, n (%)
Hypercholesterolemia, n (%)
Smoking history, n (%)
Previous TIA-stroke, n (%)
GFR > 85 mL/min, n (%)
Previous PCI, n (%)
LVEF [?] 50 %, n (%)
Left atrial dimension, mm (SD)
Left atrial dimension, mm/m <sup>2</sup> (SD)
Class I (a,b,c) antiarrhythmic drugs, n (%)
Class II antiarrhythmic drugs, n (%)
Class III antiarrhythmic drugs, n (%)
AF: atrial fibrillation; BB: Bachmann Bundle; BSA: body surface area; GFR: glomerular filtration rate; IQR: inter-quartile

<b>Table 2. Peri-procedural outcomes</b>	<b>Table 2. Peri-procedural outcomes</b>	<b>Table 2. Peri-procedural outcomes</b>	<b>Table 2. Peri-procedural outcomes</b>
	CONV Group (n=30)	BB Group (n=30)	P
Death	0	0	-
Patients transfused, n (%)	1 (3.3)	0	NS
Mechanical intubation time, h (IQR)	6 (6)	5 (5.2)	0.76
ICU LOS, hours (IQR)	23 (29.3)	26 (19.4)	0.52
Total LOS, day (IQR)	8 (2)	5 (4)	0.21
Delirium, n (%)	1 (3.3)	0	NS
Temporary pacing, n (%)	1 (3.3)	0	NS
Superficial wound dehiscence, n (%)	2 (6.6)	0	0.5
Phrenic Nerve Palsy	2 (6.6)	3 (10.0)	NS
Re-exploration for bleeding, n (%)	1 (3.3)	0	NS

<b>Table 2. Peri-procedural outcomes</b>	<b>Table 2. Peri-procedural outcomes</b>	<b>Table 2. Peri-procedural outcomes</b>	<b>Table 2. Peri-procedural outcomes</b>
Lung complications, n (%)	1 (3.3)	1 (3.3)	NS
Pre-discharge AF, n (%)	4 (13.3)	3 (10)	NS
ICU: Intensive care unit; LOS: length of stay; TIA. Other abbreviations as in table 1.	ICU: Intensive care unit; LOS: length of stay; TIA. Other abbreviations as in table 1.	ICU: Intensive care unit; LOS: length of stay; TIA. Other abbreviations as in table 1.	ICU: Intensive care unit; LOS: length of stay; TIA. Other abbreviations as in table 1.



