A case for assessment of oscillatory breathing during cardiopulmonary exercise test in risk stratification of elderly patients with chronic heart failure

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ABSTRACT
The prognostic value of exercise oscillatory breathing (EOB) during cardiopulmonary test (CPX) has been described in young chronic heart failure (HF) patients. We assessed the prognostic role of EOB vs other clinical and ventilatory parameters in elderly HF patients performing a maximal CPX.

Methods and results: We prospectively followed-up 370 HF outpatients ≥65 years after a symptom limited CPX. We tested the predictive value of clinical and ventilatory parameters for all-cause mortality and a composite of all-cause mortality and HF hospitalizations. Median age was 74 years, 51% had ischemic heart disease, 25% NYHA class III; ejection fraction was 41% [34–50]. Peak oxygen consumption (PVO₂) was 11.9 [9.9–14] mL/kg/min, the slope of the regression line relating ventilation to CO₂ output, (VE/VCO₂ slope) was 33.9 [29.8–39.2]. EOB was found in 58% of patients. At follow-up, 84 patients died and overall 158, using a time-to-first event approach, met the composite end-point. Independent predictors of all-cause mortality were CPX EOB and the ratio of VE/VCO₂ slope to peak VO₂, hemoglobin, creatinine and body mass index. The area under the ROC curve (AUC) of the Cox multivariable model was 0.80 (95% CI 0.73 to 0.87). Independent predictors of the composite end-point were EOB, VE/VCO₂ slope, hemoglobin and HF admissions in the previous year (Model AUC 0.75) [95% CI 0.69 to 0.81].

Conclusions: Among elderly HF patients, EOB prevalence is higher than middle-aged cohorts. EOB and the ratio of VE/VCO₂ slope to peak VO₂ resulted the strongest ventilatory predictor of all-cause mortality, independent of ventricular function.

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1. Introduction
Prognostic stratification of patients with chronic heart failure (HF) is useful for follow-up planning and for tailoring therapeutic interventions [1]. The elderly HF population is markedly heterogeneous. Many elderly HF patients are frail with multiple comorbidities and for them the only realistic aim is to relieve symptoms and improve quality of life. However a substantial proportion of these patients, without significant comorbidities or exercise limitations, fully qualify for management and prognostic stratification similar to those routinely used for younger patients [2].

Cardiopulmonary exercise test (CPX) provides simultaneous assessment of the performance of the heart, lungs, muscles and cellular respiration during physical exercise. Accordingly, CPX has established an important role in the identification of patients with exercise intolerance at higher risk for major cardiac events [3]. Although guidelines advocate the test to select heart transplant candidates and to distinguish between respiratory or cardiac limitations [4], CPX use and application are now beyond this role, providing prognostic and functional information in the whole spectrum of HF severity [3,4]. In particular, CPX can be an important risk stratification tool even in elderly HF patients who cannot be considered for heart transplant, provided that they are physically able to perform a maximal exercise test [2]. We previously demonstrated [5] that even in the elderly the test is safe, feasible and reliable in terms of prognostic stratification.

Classification into high, intermediate and low risk may substantially improve delivery of health services, as patients should receive care at the level best suited to their individual needs. Low-risk patients may be routinely managed in primary care, whereas patients at intermediate risk should receive strict follow-up by cardiologists.
and be timely referred for non-pharmacological treatment. In patients at high risk with a poor short term outlook advanced treatment options may be futile, and the focus of care should be on symptom relief.

In a recent study conducted on a range of patients of a suitable age for heart transplantation, ventilatory efficiency assessed by the minute ventilation/carbon dioxide production (VE/VCO₂) slope during CPX, allowed to develop a reliable risk stratification system for a wide range of HF patients with different severity stages [6]. Exercise oscillatory ventilation (EOV), a cyclic breathing pattern of oscillations in minute ventilation and gas exchange kinetics during incremental exercise, has been suggested to represent a stronger predictor than VE/VCO₂ slope [7]. EOV often co-exists with central sleep apnea and may reflect a more severe derangement of the ventilatory control system [8]. Furthermore, recent findings support the usefulness of EOV in predicting death from arrhythmic causes [9].

The relative prognostic role of VE/VCO₂ slope and EOV has not yet been fully elucidated in the elderly HF population. Our aim was to assess the prognostic value of ventilatory variables for all-cause mortality and a composite of mortality and hospitalization for HF.

2. Methods

Elderly (≥65 years) patients with a clinical diagnosis of HF [1] consecutively evaluated at the CPX laboratories of Santo Spirito Hospital, Rome, and San Paolo Hospital, Milan, Italy between March 1993 and June 2008 were enrolled in this study. The indication to CPX was clinical decision-making for follow-up planning and tailored medical or electrical treatment. Exclusion criteria were: 1) mitral stenosis or previous mitral valve surgery 2) severe aortic stenosis (peak systolic velocity ≥4.5 m/s) or severe aortic insufficiency 3) significant pulmonary or liver disease 4) recent (≤3 months) myocardial infarction 5) New York Heart Association (NYHA) functional class IV 6) clinical limitations to exercise (orthopedic problems, severe peripheral vascular disease, complex arrhythmias, history of recent syncope or unstable angina, high degree atrio-ventricular block, severe anemia, severe hyperthyroidism, and resting blood pressure ≥220/120 mm Hg) and 7) worsening symptoms or need for intravenous inotropic support during the last 4 weeks.

Patients were in NYHA classes I-II on stable drug doses since at least 3 months and able to perform a CPX test with a respiratory exchange ratio (RER) >1.00, indicating the achievement of anaerobic exercise conditions, and with a peak oxygen uptake (PVO₂) <25 mg/kg/min. Among 545 elderly HF patients, 370 were enrolled, while 135 (27%) were excluded according to the inclusion/exclusion criteria and 25 (3%) were excluded for sub-maximal exercise (RER<1.00). Baseline laboratory assessment (brain natriuretic peptide (BNP), hemoglobin, serum sodium and serum creatinine) was performed through a forward selection procedure. Hazard ratios (HR) are presented with 95% confidence intervals (CI). Non categorical variables were entered as continuous values and HR are expressed as risk per 1 unit change. Model discrimination was tested using the c statistic and expressed as area under the ROC curve (AUC).

A p value <0.05 was considered statistically significant. All statistical tests were two-tailed. Data were analyzed using The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences SPSS 10.

3. Results

3.1. Study population

Clinical characteristics and CPX parameters of the 370 elderly stable HF outpatients included in this study are summarized in Table 1. Patients were studied after optimization of drug therapy beta-blockers (carvedilol, mean dose 18 ± 6 mg) in 227 (61%), and RAS-inhibitors in 340 (92%). Cardiac resynchronization therapy and a cardioverter defibrillator had been implanted in 21 patients (5.6%).

EOB was found in 215 patients (58%). EOB was significantly associated to all male gender (63% of men and 45% of women had EOB, p <0.001), an HF admission in the previous year (66% of patients with and 46% of those without a recent HF admission had EOB, p <0.001), and a lower median LVEF (40% in patients with vs 45% in those without EOB, p <0.001).

3.2. Prediction of outcome

During a median tracking period of 29 [12–47] months, 84 patients died (51 of worsening HF, 17 of sudden death, 1 of acute myocardial infarction, 2 of stroke, 1 of pulmonary embolism, 10 of cancer, and 1 of respiratory failure); 90 subjects were admitted for worsening HF. Using a time-to-first event approach, overall 158 patients met the combined end-point of all-cause mortality or HF admission. Variables significantly associated to all-cause mortality and to the combined endpoint by univariable analysis are reported in Tables 2 and 3. By multivariable analysis, EOB predicted both all-cause mortality and the combined endpoint, independently of ventricular function (Table 4). The adjusted hazard curves for all-cause mortality or the combined end point for patients with or without EOB are shown in Figs. 1 and 2, respectively. Model AUC was 0.80 (95% CI 0.73 to 0.87) for all-cause mortality and 0.75 (95% CI 0.69 to 0.81) for the composite end point (Figs. 3 and 4).

4. Discussion

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to specifically assess the incidence of EOB in an elderly HF population, and to describe its relationship with other ventilatory abnormalities during CPX and its prognostic impact. We found that EOB is much more common in aged HF patients (58%) than previously reported in younger populations (20–30%) [7–9,14]. Still, in agreement with previous data [7–9,14] on middle aged HF patients, EOB emerged as the strongest independent CPX predictor of survival even in our elderly series.
While the poor prognosis of elderly HF patients is well known [15], few studies have focused on the role of CPX for risk stratification in this specific population or analyzed the prognostic value of ventilatory variables in patients of an age similar to those enrolled in our study [15–17]. Both Davies et al. [15] and Mejhert et al. [16] reported a powerful predictive role of VE/VCO₂ slope in a small series of HF patients. However, their analyses were restricted to patients with systolic heart failure. In a larger study by Cicoira et al. [17], both PVO₂ and VE/VCO₂ slope were mortality predictors. In our previous report [18] in 331 consecutive outpatients aged >70 years with mild to moderate congestive HF and both impaired and preserved systolic functions, we found that a reduced glomerular filtration rate and a steeper VE/VCO₂ slope provide additional independent prognostic information across the spectrum of ventricular function impairment and help to identify high risk patients better than BNP and LVEF. In 396 elderly (>65 years) HF patients, Parikh et al. [19] demonstrated that PVO₂ and the Heart Failure Survival Score were both excellent predictors of survival. Remarkably, in these studies EOB was not included in the final analysis.

In the present series, we could confirm that all-cause mortality for HF patients over 65 years is high, even in a stable outpatient population. By univariable analysis, common prognostic indicators such as age, NYHA class, LVEF, BNP, PVO₂, and VE/VCO₂ slope were mortality predictors. In our previous report [3] in 370 study patients, we found that PVO₂ and the Heart Failure Survival Score were both excellent and help to identify high risk patients better than BNP and LVEF. Table 3 presents the univariable predictors of all-cause death and HF admission. Table 4 presents the independent predictors of outcome by multivariable analysis.
patients with diastolic HF [14], the prevalence of EOB (31%) was similar to the one observed in subjects with systolic dysfunction.

The prevalence of EOB has never been explored in elderly HF patients. Our study is the first to assess this phenomenon in a “real world” elderly HF population, as demonstrated by the relatively high prevalence of female gender and high median LVEF. We observed EOB in a proportion of patients (58%) near double compared with the prevalence in younger subjects, potential heart transplant candidates [7–9,14]. Although we cannot fully explain the reasons for this high EOB prevalence in the elderly, the loss of elastic recoil of the chest wall due to the aging process might substantially contribute to the exacerbation of an oscillatory breathing pattern during exercise.

4.1. Clinical implications

The coexistence of EOB and ventilatory inefficiency identifies a population with severe circulatory and ventilatory instability, that carries a heavier burden of adverse events than conferred by any single ventilatory abnormality. Medical management for these patients should be reviewed and optimized whenever possible: beta-blockade [20] as well as ACE-inhibitors [21] has been shown to significantly reduce the VE/VCO2 slope, while their effects on EOB are not known; tailored up-titration should also be considered. Aerobic exercise training has likewise the potential to improve prognosis by reducing VE/VCO2 slope [22]. Strict clinical follow-up should be envisaged to recognize early clinical signs of impending destabilization and to institute appropriate changes in treatment. Cardiac resynchronization therapy has been shown to significantly reduce the VE/VCO2 slope and should be considered for high risk subjects, after optimized medical management.

4.2. Study limitations

Our study population was relatively small and included only clinically stable “robust” outpatients with mild to moderate HF, who did not have important comorbidities and were furthermore able to perform a CPX.
Our study does not add any information on the pathophysiology that triggers and sustains EOB in elderly HF population. Nonetheless, the observed high EOB prevalence suggests that further studies are desirable in order to quantify EOB relevance in HF populations with more advanced disease stages.

We did not perform serial CPX to investigate whether some patients developed EOB during the follow-up and to assess the impact of optimized treatment on it. This is certainly an important point to address in future investigations.

In conclusion, an EOB pattern is remarkably frequent in elderly HF patients and represents a key marker of adverse outcome. These findings prospect the utility of comprehensively assessing CPX-derived information to optimize the clinical and prognostic workup of elderly HF patients.

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