Inclusion of the fractured level into the construct of short segment fixation in patients with thoracolumbar fractures: clinical and radiological outcome

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Abstract

Background: Thoracolumbar fractures represent a widespread injuries that can cause significant disability and strain the healthcare system. Different surgical approaches are described in the literature. This study was conducted to evaluate the fractured level inclusion in short-segment fixation of thoracolumbar junction spine fractures.

Results: Preoperative neurological deficit was reported in seven patients ranging from ASIA grade C to D. All of these patients improved to grade E by the end of the follow-up period, except for one patient who improved from grade C to D. The mean Oswestry Disability Index was 19.87%. The mean postoperative Cobb angle was 11.77° which significantly improved compared to a preoperative value of 19.37°. There was a significant improvement in the postoperative anterior and posterior vertebral body height compared to the preoperative values. The vertebral body compression ratio significantly improved during the postoperative period to a mean of 84% compared to 76% preoperative.

Conclusions: There was significant improvement of the postoperative values of the mean Cobb angle, the anterior and the posterior vertebral body height as well as the vertebral body compression ratio compared to the preoperative values.

Keywords: Thoracolumbar fractures, Short segment fixation, Inclusion of the fractured level
Fractures were classified according to their load-sharing score calculated using the scoring system of McCormack et al. [12].

Surgical method
Standard posterior spinal approach was performed in all cases. Trans-pedicular screws were inserted in the adjacent vertebrae above and below the fractured vertebra under image guidance then a trans-pedicular screw/s were inserted in the fractured vertebra according to integrity of the pedicles. Spinal canal decompression was done at the fracture level in cases with compromised canal or neural structure compression. Connecting rods were placed on either side after precontouring them according to the sagittal profile of the thoracic kyphosis and the lumbar lordosis and the bone graft collected from decompression process was stuffed laterally to enhance lateral intertransverse spinal fusion (Figs. 1, 2).

Outcome evaluation
Primary outcome included the following:
Clinical evaluation was done by determining the ASIA grade and the MRC scale at the immediate postoperative period (2nd day), 1, 3 and 6 months following surgery while the Oswestry disability score was recorded 6 month after surgery. Radiological evaluation in the form of Cobb angle measurement and vertebral body height at the immediate postoperative period (2nd day), 1, 3 and 6 months following surgery (Fig. 3).
Secondary outcome including the operative time, the amount of intraoperative blood loss and the postoperative hospital stay were recorded.

Results
The study included thirty patients with thoracolumbar junction fractures (T11–L2), twenty one males and nine females. The mean age was 32.47 years (range: 18–63 years).
According to the mode of trauma, we found that the majority of cases (nineteen) were caused by fall from height while eight patients had road traffic accidents. According to level of fracture, twelve patients had L1#, while  L2 and D12 fractures occurred in nine cases each.
According to McCormack scoring system, 76.7% of the fractures included in our study had a load-sharing score > 6. The remaining fractures scored ≤ 6. The remaining fractures scored > 7.
Preoperative evaluation revealed that twenty three patients were neurologically intact (ASIA grade E), while seven patients had incomplete neurological deficit (six ASIA grade D and one ASIA grade C). According to MRC scale, twenty three patients were grade 5, four patients were grade 4, two patients were grade 3, one patient was grade 1 and...
Postoperative clinical evaluation showed that the patients who had neurological deficits reported to the outpatient clinic with improved neurologic status compared to the pre-operative deficits as shown in Table 1. According to the ASIA scale, one patient with pre-operative ASIA C grade improved to grade D, while six patients with ASIA grade D improved to ASIA grade E at the end of the follow-up period.

Oswestry disability index was estimated at the end of the follow-up period and it was found that the patients had minimal to moderate disability with Oswestry disability index score ranging from 6.0 to 48.0% and a mean score of 19.87%.

The mean preoperative Cobb angle was 19.37° which improved significantly to 11.77° at the end of the follow-up period ($P<0.001$).

The mean preoperative anterior vertebral body height of the fractured vertebra was 15.18 mm, this improved in the immediate postoperative period to 17.10 mm with 13.94% improvement. At the end of the follow-up period, the mean anterior vertebral body height was 18.04 mm with 19.64% improvement.
compared to the preoperative values. The mean posterior vertebral body height of the fractured vertebral was 19.41 mm. In the immediate postoperative period, this value improved to be 20.79 mm with 7.33% improvement and at the final follow-up evaluation it was 21.31 mm with 10.12% improvement. This shows significant restoration of the vertebral body height after fixation and that this restoration was maintained until the end of the follow-up period (Table 2).

**Discussion**

Many studies showed that the most common causes for spinal fractures are fall from height and road traffic accidents respectively [13, 14].

Although the thoracolumbar junction fractures constitute a major portion of spine fractures as it represents more than 54% of all spine fractures, the instrumentation of this region remains a matter of great controversy, however nowadays posterior short-segment trans-pedicular screw fixation is preferred for fixation of these fractures than long-segment fixation since it offers less operative time, less intraoperative blood loss and better preservation of motion. However, this method was associated with higher rates of implant failure and recurrence of kyphosis and pain [15]. Inclusion of the fractured level in the short-segment construct was first described by Dick et al. [8] in 1994 and this method since then has advanced to overcome these drawbacks, he concluded that adding screws at the fracture level enhanced spinal stability, provided stronger fixation and diminished stress on the remaining pedicle screws in the short-segment construct [16].

**Table 1** Clinical evaluation of the patients according to ASIA scale

| Grade | Number of patients | Pre-operative | Immediate postoperative | After 2 weeks | After 3 months | After 6 months |
|-------|--------------------|---------------|-------------------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|
| E     | 23                 | 23            | 24                      | 27           | 29            |               |
| D     | 6                  | 6             | 5                       | 3            | 1             |               |
| C     | 1                  | 1             | 1                       | 0            | 0             |               |

**Table 2** Comparison between pre-operative and post-operative radiological parameters

| Parameter                      | Preoperative | Postoperative (final follow-up) | Mean percentage of improvement (%) |
|--------------------------------|--------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Cobb’s angle (mean)            | 19.37°       | 11.77°                          | 41.6                              |
| Anterior vertebral body height (mean) | 15.18 mm    | 18.04 mm                        | 19.64                             |
| Posterior vertebral body height (mean) | 19.41 mm   | 21.31 mm                        | 10.12                             |

**Fig. 3** a Pre-operative CT, sagittal view showing unstable L1 #. b Pre-operative MRI, T2WI, sagittal view showing L1 #. c Post-operative CT, sagittal view showing screws in place with adequate reduction of retropulsed fragment. d Post-operative CT, 3D reconstruction, posterior view showing 2 screws in D12, 2 screws in L2, and 1 screw in L1.
Of the thirty cases included in the study, seven patients were presented with incomplete neurological deficits (ASIA grade D & C). These patients reported improvement of the neurological state in the follow-up period as six patients improved to ASIA grade E and one patient to ASIA grade D.

Patients reported minimal to moderate disability on the Oswestry disability index after surgery. The mean ODI was 19.87%. The study of Sun et al. [17], reported similar results with mean ODI of 16.7% in the group treated with short segment-fxation including the fracture level.

Our study showed that the mean operative time was 102.17 min, while in the study done by Dobran et al. [13], the mean operative time in the long-segment fixation group was 172 min that was longer than our used method by about 70 min indicating that short segment fixation provides a time saving method better than the long-segment one. These results were in concordance with the results of Adawi et al. [18], where the mean operative time was 129.7 min.

As regarding the kyphotic angle, the current study showed a significant improvement in postoperative Cobb angle when compared to preoperative values ($P ≤ 0.001$) as the mean preoperative Cobb angle was 19.37° while the mean postoperative Cobb angle was 11.77°. Our results agreed with a study conducted by El Behairy et al. [19], concluded that short segment pedicle screw fixation including the fractured vertebra accomplished good correction of segmental kyphosis and maintained at the end of a 2-year study. Dobran et al. [13] showed no significant difference between short-segment fixation including fractured level and long-segment fixation in kyphosis correction and maintenance. While, Farrokhi et al. [20] showed that correction of kyphosis was better achieved with short-segment fixation including the fractured level than short-segment fxation excluding the fractured level. In our study, measurement of the vertebral body height showed that there was significant restoration of vertebral body height after fixation. The mean preoperative anterior and posterior vertebral body height were 15.18 mm and 19.41 mm respectively. These values improved to be 18.04 mm and 21.31 mm respectively at the end of the follow-up period. This was supported by the study of Kanna et al. [21] that showed significant restoration of vertebral body height which was maintained till the end of the follow-up period as they found that the mean preoperative anterior vertebral body height was 13.86 mm that improved to 21.6 mm in the immediate postoperative and to 21.1 mm at the end of the follow-up period. The study also found that the mean preoperative posterior vertebral body height was 25.7 mm that improved to 28.1 mm after surgery and to 28.1 mm at the end of the follow-up period. The study done by El Behairy et al. [19], also confirmed that with inclusion of the fractured level in the short-segment construct provided better restoration and maintenance of vertebral body height for up to 2 years after surgery.

Radiological signs of spinal fusion were assessed in the follow-up radiographs, there was no lucency around the screws in 96.7% of cases, bridging bone formation was present in 93.3% of cases and there was no displacement or breakage of screws. Despite being popular, posterior short-segment fixation has its drawbacks including higher rates of implant failure than long-segment fixation and loss of kyphosis correction over time. An alternative method is including the fracture level in the short-segment construct. This method provides fewer rates of implant failure and recurrence of kyphosis. This was supported by a study conducted by Mahar et al. [9] reported increased biomechanical stability using this technique. Also the studies of Guven et al. [10] and Bolesta et al. [16] showed increased stability and maintained kyphosis correction when inclusion of fracture level was used.

**Conclusions**

Inclusion of the fracture level in the short-segment construct has offered a safe effective method in kyphosis correction, in addition to lower implant failure rates, without additional complications and with a comparable clinical and functional outcome. We recommend insertion of screws into the pedicles of the fractured vertebra when considering a short-segment posterior fixation for thoracolumbar spine fractures.

**Abbreviations**

| # | Fracture | ASIA: American Spinal Injury Association; CT: Computed tomography; MRC: Medical Research Council; MRI: Magnetic Resonance Imaging; Min: Minutes; Ml: Milliliter; Mm: Millimeter; ODI: Oswestry disability index; VBCR: Vertebral body compression ratio; AVBH: Anterior vertebral body height; PVBH: Posterior vertebral body height. |

**Acknowledgements**

Not applicable.

**Authors’ contributions**

All authors have contributed to the content of this paper. ‘EE’: Shared in putting study design, collection of data, analysis and interpretation of data, writing the manuscript, and final approval of the version to be published. ‘AH’: Shared in putting study design, collection of data, analysis and interpretation of data, writing the manuscript, and final approval of the version to be published. ‘AT’: Collection of data, analysis and interpretation of data, and final approval of the version to be published. ‘RN’: Conception and design of study, drafting of article, analysis and interpretation of data, and final approval of the version to be published. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

**Funding**

No available fund (This research was funded by the authors).

**Availability of data and materials**

The data and materials of this manuscript are available for sharing.
Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The present study has been performed in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and an informed signed consent was taken from all the patients before enrolling them into the study after approval of Ethical Committee (Number: 06/19), Qena Faculty of Medicine, South Valley University.

Consent for publication

A written consent has been obtained from every included patients regarding publishing theirs details and images.

Competing interests

There is no conflict of interest on this manuscript.

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Received: 9 October 2021   Accepted: 22 October 2021

Published online: 03 December 2021

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