INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 pandemic has been devastating throughout the world and remains a challenge in terms of diagnosis and management.1-4 Although the current diagnostic criterion for COVID-19 is the real-time reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR),5 radiology has also played a significant role in the diagnosis and quantifying the severity of COVID-19 pulmonary disease.6-7 As per guidelines by the Radiological Society of North America (RSNA), imaging is only indicated in positive COVID-19 patients having worsening respiratory status and in suspected COVID-19 patients having moderate to severe symptoms with the unavailability of RT-PCR tests.8

X-rays and Computed Tomography (CT) became more prevalent globally in helping to increase awareness and track the progress of Covid-19 pulmonary disease.9-11 The disease profile evolved...
rapidly, as evident by literature, a spectrum of significant imaging findings was noted in asymptomatic patients and, on the other hand, critically ill patients with no significant radiological manifestations were seen.\textsuperscript{12,13} However, it has been noted that chest X-ray is less sensitive in detecting the early manifestations of pulmonary disease, although it can detect the disease in advanced stages. CT scan, on the other hand, can detect early parenchymal lung disease, disease progression, and alternative diagnoses.\textsuperscript{14} Due to the relative constraints of CT scanner availability, higher radiation dose, and decontamination procedure, patients are not routinely referred for CT scan.\textsuperscript{15} Chest X-ray is the initial imaging investigation in patients with respiratory symptoms; yet, much less has been written about it for COVID-19.\textsuperscript{16}

This study was conducted to identify the role of radiological imaging in the assessment of disease severity in a cohort of the Pakistani population as no published study of such a large sample size was detected during data search for both CT and X-ray.

METHODS

This prospective observational study has been conducted at the Dow institute of Radiology, Dow University of Health Sciences from June 2020 to August 2020. Approval of the Ethical Review Board (Ref: IRB-1694/DUHS/Approval/2020, dated: 27\textsuperscript{th} June 2020) was obtained; informed consent from all patients undergoing chest X-ray and CT scans was taken regarding the publication of their data while maintaining confidentiality.

Epi Info sample size calculator is used for the estimation of sample size taking confidence interval 99.9\%, margin of error 5\%, reported frequency of ground-glass opacities on CT lung 86\%.\textsuperscript{17} The estimated sample size came out to be 319. However, a total of 596 patients were included, out of which 499 had a chest X-ray only, 63 had a chest CT scan only, and 34 patients had both chest X-ray and CT scans. Chest X-ray of all the suspected COVID-19 patients (having fever > 38°C with symptoms of lower respiratory tract illness like a cough or shortness of breath and history of traveling from abroad or contact with a RT-PCR positive COVID-19 patient within 14 days of onset of symptoms or with fever >38°C with a severe acute respiratory illness like pneumonia or acute respiratory distress syndrome requiring hospitalization along with confirmed cases (RT-PCR positive) admitted in hospital isolation wards and intensive care units were obtained through portable X-ray machines. Both non-contrast imaging after volumetric like high resolution CT and contrast-enhanced CT chest were performed as per the primary physician’s request. All X-rays and CT scans were done after using personal protective equipment and following the guidelines for safe exposure to limit cross-infection.

Image Analysis: All cases were reported by two junior radiologists and two senior radiologists having more than 10 years of reporting experience. The presence of imaging features including consolidation, air space shadowing, and pleural effusions were noted in X-rays of all suspected and confirmed patients. CT images were classified predominantly as having ground-glass opacities, consolidations, cavitation, nodular opacities, crazy paving, pleural/pericardial effusions, and lymphadenopathy. Findings were further categorized into the zonal (X-ray) and lobar predominance (CT).

Radiological Scoring:

**Chest X-ray severity score:** Severity was measured through Radiographic Assessment of Lung Edema (RALE) criteria that includes no involvement, mild (<25\%) involvement, moderate (25-50\%) involvement, severe (50-75\%) involvement, critical (>75\%) involvement.\textsuperscript{18}

**CT scan chest severity score:** Involvement of 0\% lung was considered as none, 1-25\% was considered as mild, 26-50\% was considered as moderate, 51-75\% was considered as severe, and 76-100\% was considered as critical.\textsuperscript{19} X-ray and CT severity were further subcategorized into two groups: mild and moderate cases were merged and labeled as a minor group (having <50\% involvement). While severe and critical cases were merged and labeled as a major group (>50\% involvement). A detailed clinical history was obtained from patients through a pre-structured questionnaire. The epidemiological and clinical data including age, sex, traveling history, history of contact with RT-PCR positive patient, clinical symptoms including fever, cough, sputum, shortness of breath, diarrhea, body pain and chest pain, duration of symptoms, and comorbidities including hypertension, diabetes and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease was recorded. RT-PCR of all the suspected radiological cases was followed, and the cases were finally grouped as positive or negative for COVID-19.

**Statistical Analysis:** SPSS version 21 was used for analysis. The mean ±SD for age and onset days of COVID-19 symptoms was determined. Frequency and percentages were calculated for gender, history
of travel, history of contact with a COVID-19 patient, symptoms, past medical history, CT chest, and X-ray findings. A comparative analysis of groups of X-ray and CT severity with patients’ demographic data and clinical characteristics and RT-PCR result was done. Inferential statistics were explored using Independent t-test, and Chi-square/Fisher-Exact test applied. p-value ≤0.05 was considered as significant. Diagnostic accuracy of X-ray and CT scan was also calculated using PCR as gold standard.

RESULTS

Of 596 patients, the mean age was 54.58 ±13.64 years. There were 414 (69.5%) males and 182 (30.5%) females. The mean onset of symptoms was 3.91 ±1.41 days. The cough was the most predominant symptoms observed in 544 (91.3%), fever in 473 (79.4%), shortness of breath in 442 (74.2%), and body pain in 405 (67.9%) patients. The frequency of comorbidities showed that hypertension was observed in 49 (8.2%), diabetes in 27 (4.5%), and COPD in 16 (2.7%) patients.

X-ray findings were reported in 533 patients. Of these, normal X-ray findings were observed in 61 (11.4%), mild in 58 (10.9%), moderate in 110 (20.6%), severe in 117 (19.6%), and critical in 187 (35.1%) patients. (Fig.1) Comparative analysis of severe/critical findings on X-rays with demographic and clinical characteristics showed a significantly higher proportion of X-ray severity in patients with shortness of breath (p-value <0.001) and chest pain (p-value 0.002). (Table-I)

CT scans were performed in 97 patients. Of these normal CT findings were observed in 9 (9.3%), mild in 27 (27.8%), moderate in 36 (37.1%), severe in 20 (20.6%), and critical in 5 (5.2%) patients.

| Both X-rays and CT scans performed | (n=34) |
|-----------------------------------|--------|
| No severe/critical findings on X-rays | (n=03) |
| Severe/critical findings on X-rays | (n=31) |
| Severe/critical findings on CT scan | (n=0, 0%) |
| No severe/critical findings on CT scans | (n=3, 100%) |
| Severe/critical findings on CT scans | (n=18, 58.1%) |
| No severe/critical findings on CT scans | (n=13, 41.9%) |

Fig.1: Severity findings in patients with both X-ray and CT examinations (n=34).

Comparative analysis of severe/critical findings on CT scans with demographic and clinical characteristics showed a significantly higher proportion of CT severity in patients with longer duration of symptoms (p-value 0.003), patients with the complaint of body pain (p-value 0.011), and travel history (p-value 0.042). (Table-I)

There were 34 (5.70%) patients in whom both X-ray and CT examinations were performed. Of

Fig.2: (A) Chest X-ray supine view of a 45 years male patient with severe dyspnea showing bilateral mid and lower zone airspace shadowing with peripheral predilection. (B) HRCT chest lung window axial images of same patient showing bilateral peripheral subpleural areas of ground glass haze with lower lobe predominance. (C,D) CT chest contrast axial image in lung window showing subpleural ground glass haze, reticulation and crazy paving in lower lobes in a 65 years male patients with fever, cough and sore throat. (E-G) HRCT chest lung window axial images of a 60 years male patient with fever, cough, dyspnea and body aches showing bilateral ground glass haze and crazy paving in peripheral subpleural location of both lungs. (H) HRCT chest lung window image of a 48 years male patient with fever, dyspnea and body ache showing bilateral peripheral subpleural consolidations with minimal ground glass haze in both lungs.
these 34 patients, 31 (91.2%) patients showed severe/critical findings on X-rays, and 3 (8.8%) showed no severe/critical findings on X-rays. Of 31 patients in whom X-ray findings showed severe/critical findings, only 18 (58.1%) were found severe/critical on CT scans whereas in 3 patients in whom X-ray findings showed no severe/critical findings, CT scans also showed no severe/critical findings in all these patients, i.e. 3 (100%). (Fig.1)

Radiological profile of abnormal X-ray findings showed that of 472 patients in whom abnormality was observed, the majority of the patients were presented with an alveolar pattern, bilateral lung involvement, and consolidation, i.e. 459 (97.2%), 453 (99.6%), and 356 (75.4%) respectively. Moreover, lobar predominance showed lower zone

Table-I: Comparative analysis of X-ray and CT severity findings with demographic and clinical characteristics of the patients.

|                     | Severe/critical findings on X-ray (n=533) | Severe/critical findings on CT (n=97) | Severe/critical findings on both X-ray & CT (n=34) |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
|                     | Yes (n=304) | No (n=229) | p-value | Yes (n=30) | No (n=67) | p-value | Yes (n=18) | No (n=16) | p-value |
| Age, years          | 55.01 ±13.05 | 54.28 ±14.48 | 0.543azard | 58.33 ±10.14 | 54.72 ±13.96 | 0.205azard |
| Gender              | Male | 211 (69.4) | 157 (68.6) | 0.834azard | 21 (70) | 48 (71.6) | 0.869azard | 12 (66.7) | 11 (68.8) | 0.897 |
|                     | Female | 93 (30.6) | 72 (31.4) | 9 (30) | 19 (28.4) | 6 (33.3) | 5 (31.3) |
| The onset of symptoms, days | 4.21 ±1.33 | 4.07 ±1.26 | 0.217azard | 3.30 ±1.77 | 2.40 ±1.06 | 0.003azard |
| Symptoms            | Fever | 211 (69) | 175 (76.4) | 0.031azard | 21 (70) | 52 (77.6) | 0.422azard | 16 (88.9) | 14 (87.5) | 0.900 |
|                     | Shortness of breath | 254 (83.6) | 141 (61.6) | <0.001azard | 23 (76.7) | 53 (79.1) | 0.788azard | 16 (88.9) | 13 (81.3) | 0.530 |
|                     | Cough | 287 (94.4) | 213 (93) | 0.508azard | 22 (73.3) | 54 (80.6) | 0.422azard | 17 (94.4) | 15 (93.8) | 0.932 |
|                     | Sputum | 20 (6.6) | 8 (3.5) | 0.114azard | 13 (43.3) | 42 (62.7) | 0.075azard | 3 (16.7) | 4 (25) | 0.549 |
|                     | Diarrhea | 12 (3.9) | 16 (7) | 0.119azard | 1 (3.3) | 2 (3) | 0.927azard | 1 (5.6) | 0 (0) | 0.339 |
|                     | Chest Pain | 246 (80.9) | 159 (69.4) | 0.002azard | 19 (63.3) | 37 (55.2) | 0.455azard | 14 (77.8) | 16 (100) | 0.045 |
|                     | Body Pain | 238 (78.3) | 164 (71.6) | 0.076azard | 15 (50) | 16 (23.9) | 0.011azard | 14 (77.8) | 14 (87.5) | 0.458 |
| Comorbidity         | HTN | 15 (4.9) | 19 (8.3) | 0.116azard | 6 (20) | 12 (17.9) | 0.807azard | 2 (11.1) | 1 (6.3) | 0.618 |
|                     | Diabetes | 5 (1.6) | 10 (4.4) | 0.060azard | 2 (6.7) | 12 (17.9) | 0.145azard | 0 (0) | 2 (12.5) | 0.122 |
|                     | COPD | 5 (1.6) | 6 (2.6) | 0.433azard | 1 (3.3) | 4 (6) | 0.587azard | 18 (100) | 16 (100) | - |
|                     | Travel History | 15 (4.9) | 12 (5.2) | 0.873azard | 4 (13.3) | 5 (7.5) | 0.042azard | 2 (11.1) | 1 (6.3) | 0.618 |
|                     | Contact History | 66 (21.7) | 41 (17.9) | 0.277azard | 15 (50) | 43 (64.2) | 0.188azard | 5 (27.8) | 4 (25) | 0.855 |

azard Independent t-test applied, *Chi-square/Fisher-Exact test applied, *p-value ≤0.05.
findings on X-rays severity were not present, i.e. 304 (100%) and 226 (98.7%) respectively, p-value 0.076. Similarly, CT findings showed an insignificantly higher proportion of PCR positive cases in whom severity was present as compared to those in which severity was not present, i.e. 29 (96.7%) and 61 (91.0%) respectively, p-value 0.431.

**DISCUSSION**

This study was conducted in a large public sector tertiary care hospital specified by the government for COVID-19 with designated three isolation wards and three ICUs. Moreover, in this hospital, investigations for the COVID-19 patients were offered free of cost, therefore we were able to cater the needs of a large population. The findings of the study identified the occurrence of ground-glass opacity as the most common finding in CT scans of COVID-19 pulmonary disease. (Fig.2) This is coinciding with the outcomes of previous studies done in China, America, Europe, and Pakistan. It is present in almost all abnormal CT scans making it an essential diagnostic feature. A study by Li, Y. and Xia, L confirmed the absence of ground-glass opacity in COVID 19 positive patients to be a rare occurrence. Crazy paving was the second most common finding, in contrast to a much lower reported frequency in the previously published studies in China, Italy, and also in other cities of Pakistan. A similar high frequency was reported by Li K et al., who compared the chest CT features associated with severe and critical COVID-19 pulmonary disease with mild cases and stated that crazy paving is associated with a higher severity of disease and another study suggested that it could be used as a marker for disease progression. Therefore, the other studies which showed lower frequency could be assumed to be conducted in a less severely affected population and with smaller sample size. Consolidation was the next most common finding when it was compared with ground-glass opacity as the most common finding in CT scans of COVID-19 pulmonary disease. In this study, pleural effusion, lymphadenopathy, cavitation, and pericardial effusion were rarely noted, as was seen in previous literature. In this context, Bai and his colleagues have concluded that these particular findings were found to be more prevalent in viral pneumonia other than COVID-19 pulmonary disease.

In terms of severity, most of the patients who presented for CT scan showed moderate severity, and the patients who presented for X-rays showed critical severity. There could be few reasons for this; firstly, the utility of CT scan as a screening tool was discouraged by leading radiological societies. and
was indicated in moderate to severe cases only as mentioned previously. Secondly, portable X-rays, as opposed to CT, were more commonly being carried out in severely ill patients admitted in ICUs (including those on mechanical ventilation). Due to the constraints of logistics of shifting to the radiology department and rigorous time-consuming decontamination measures that followed. This may have had an impact on results.

Regarding the PCR negative patients undergoing the X-ray, none were present in the major group. However, more than half were found to be in the major group on the CT scan, suggesting that the CT scan is highly sensitive for the detection of disease in the presence of negative PCR. This can be attributed to the fact that PCR has a high false-negative rate, and the unavailability of testing kits in early outbreak restricted the prompt diagnosis of infected patients. Therefore, the role of the CT scan was recognized as a diagnostic tool. In a low resource country like Pakistan, CT scan was mostly advised by physicians in highly suspected patients. On the other hand, for severely ill and confirmed cases, the X-rays were used as a diagnostic tool due to cost-effectiveness and logistic problems, as discussed earlier.

**Strength and Limitations of the study:** The findings of this study can be highlighted in the light of certain limitations. Firstly, in the current study, follow-up of patients was not carried out. Therefore, disease outcome was not assessed. Secondly, the patients were not categorized into groups according to the duration of symptoms to study the various imaging stages of this disease as present in previous literature. Moreover, some patients may have received therapy in the form of antimicrobial drugs or steroids, which may have altered the disease severity at the time of imaging and this factor was not taken into account. The strength of this study was a larger sample size including both X-ray and CT scans. To the best of our knowledge no such study in Pakistan has been conducted so far that has included both radiological modalities, evaluating data for COVID-19 pulmonary disease for this large number of patients. Further studies are recommended to evaluate the disease pattern over time with the help of follow-up imaging to determine patient outcomes.

**CONCLUSION**

In our cohort, most of the patients undergoing chest X-ray showed severe lung involvement, whereas most of the other patients undergoing CT scan chest revealed mild to moderate lung disease.

**Abbreviations:**
- COVID-19 = Coronavirus disease 2019
- CT = Computed Tomography
- GGO = Ground-Glass Opacity
- RALE = Radiographic Assessment of Lung Edema
- RSNA = Radiological Society of North America
- RT PCR = Reverse Transcriptase – Polymerase Chain Reaction

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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Table-III: Diagnostic accuracy of X-ray and CT scans taking PCR findings as gold standard.

| PCR Finding | Abnormal X-ray | Abnormal CT |
|-------------|----------------|-------------|
|             | Yes            | No          | Yes        | No          |
| Sensitivity | 88.87%         | 96.67%      | 88.87%     | 96.67%      |
| Specificity | 66.67%         | 85.71%      | 66.67%     | 85.71%      |
| PPV         | 99.79%         | 98.86%      | 99.79%     | 98.86%      |
| NPV         | 3.28%          | 66.67%      | 3.28%      | 66.67%      |
| Overall Diagnostic Accuracy | 88.74% | 95.88% | 88.74% | 95.88% |
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SA, MK, MM: Manuscript writing.

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