The PANDORA Study: Prevalence and Outcome of Acute Hypoxemic Respiratory Failure in the Pre-COVID-19 Era

OBJECTIVES: To establish the epidemiological characteristics, ventilator management, and outcomes in patients with acute hypoxemic respiratory failure (AHRF), with or without acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), in the era of lung-protective mechanical ventilation (MV).

DESIGN: A 6-month prospective, epidemiological, observational study.

SETTING: A network of 22 multidisciplinary ICUs in Spain.

PATIENTS: Consecutive mechanically ventilated patients with AHRF (defined as $P_{a}O_2/F_I_0_2 \leq 300$ mm Hg on positive end-expiratory pressure [PEEP] $\geq 5$ cm H$_2$O and $F_I_0_2 \geq 0.3$) and followed-up until hospital discharge.

INTERVENTIONS: None.

MEASUREMENTS AND MAIN RESULTS: Primary outcomes were prevalence of AHRF and ICU mortality. Secondary outcomes included prevalence of ARDS, ventilatory management, and use of adjunctive therapies. During the study period, 9,803 patients were admitted: 4,456 (45.5%) received MV, 1,271 (13%) met AHRF criteria (1,241 were included into the study: 333 [26.8%] met Berlin ARDS criteria and 908 [73.2%] did not). At baseline, tidal volume was $6.9 \pm 1.1$ mL/kg predicted body weight, PEEP $8.4 \pm 3.1$ cm H$_2$O, $F_I_0_2 0.63 \pm 0.22$, and plateau pressure $21.5 \pm 5.4$ cm H$_2$O. ARDS patients received higher $F_I_0_2$ and PEEP than non-ARDS ($0.75 \pm 0.22$ vs $0.59 \pm 0.20$ cm H$_2$O and $10.3 \pm 3.4$ vs $7.7 \pm 2.6$ cm H$_2$O, respectively ($p < 0.0001$)). Adjunctive therapies were rarely used in non-ARDS patients. Patients without ARDS had higher ventilator-free days than ARDS ($12.2 \pm 11.6$ vs $9.3 \pm 9.7$ d; $p < 0.001$). All-cause ICU mortality was similar in AHRF with or without ARDS (34.8% [95% CI, 29.7–40.2] vs 35.5% [95% CI, 32.3–38.7]; $p = 0.837$).

CONCLUSIONS: AHRF without ARDS is a very common syndrome in the ICU with a high mortality that requires specific studies into its epidemiology and ventilatory management. We found that the prevalence of ARDS was much lower than reported in recent observational studies.

KEY WORDS: acute hypoxemic respiratory failure; acute respiratory distress syndrome; epidemiology; lung-protective ventilation; outcome; positive end-expiratory pressure

Mechanical ventilation (MV) is ubiquitous in the ICU setting. Worldwide, more than 300 million patients/yr are ventilated, mostly in the operating room, with approximately 10 million ventilated annually in ICUs (1, 2). A recent population-based study revealed that about 310 people per 100,000 adult population undergo MV annually for nonsurgical indications (3). Main goals of MV include relief of excessive work of breathing and improvement of gas exchange, without impairing hemodynamics, or subjecting patients to iatrogenic injury from ventilator-induced lung injury.
Limiting tidal volume (Vt) and inspiratory pressures while providing sufficient positive end-expiratory pressure (PEEP) to minimize lung collapse is the underlying principle lung-protective MV (4).

Hypoxemia is common in mechanically ventilated ICU patients. Approximately 1 million patients worldwide develop acute hypoxic respiratory failure (AHRF), although epidemiological data on the exact prevalence and outcomes vary substantially (5–12). The acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), considered a severe form of AHRF, has been studied widely. However, there are relatively few studies in the current era of lung-protective ventilation addressing epidemiological characteristics, patterns of ventilation, and clinical outcomes in AHRF patients without ARDS. Recent retrospective surveys using administrative databases have substantial limitations since they did not include specific hypoxic conditions (13–15) or were focused on ARDS mortality (16, 17). A 1-day point prevalence study conducted in 2016 in hypoxic ICU patients had a number of limitations, including the fact that arterial blood gases were not analyzed in 31% of patients on the study day.

The goal of the present study was to establish the epidemiological characteristics, ventilator management, and clinical outcomes in invasively mechanically ventilated patients with AHRF (defined as Pao₂/FIO₂ ≤ 300 mm Hg on PEEP ≥ 5 cm H₂O and FIO₂ ≥ 0.3) admitted to a network of hospitals in Spain. The methodology of this study has been piloted in a smaller study in Wales (19). We postulated that these data would be valuable in understanding how recent recommendations on lung-protective ventilation have affected patient care and outcomes in AHRF patients with and without ARDS.

METHODS

This study was approved by the Ethics Committees of Hospital Universitario La Paz, Madrid (#PI-2694) and Valladolid-Este (#PI17-594), Spain, and adopted by all participating centers, as required by Spanish legislation. The study was considered an audit, with waived informed consent, except in two sites (Supplemental File, http://links.lww.com/CCX/A978). The study followed “Strengthening the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology” guidelines (20) and was registered with ClinicalTrials.gov (NCT03145974).

Patients, Study Design, and Oversight

This was a 6-month, multicenter, prospective, observational study conducted in 22 ICUs in 14 geographical areas of Spain under the acronym Prevalence AND Outcome of acute hypoxemic Respiratory Failure (PANDORA) Network (details in Supplemental File, http://links.lww.com/CCX/A978). Patients were enrolled during three periods of two consecutive months (May 1, 2017–June 30, 2017, October 1, 2017–November 30, 2017, February 1, 2018–March 31, 2018), covering several seasons. During study periods, all consecutive patients were screened daily and included if they fulfilled the following criteria: 1) age greater than or equal to 18 years, 2) underwent endotracheal intubation and MV, although patients could have been on noninvasive respiratory support before intubation, and 3) Pao₂/FIO₂ less than or equal to 300 mm Hg with PEEP greater than or equal to 5 cm
H₂O and FIO₂ greater than or equal to 0.3. We did not use oxygen saturation as measured by pulse oximetry (SpO₂) as a surrogate for Pao₂ for enrolling patients. Clinicians only considered qualifying blood gases while patients were clinically stable and did not consider transient falls in Pao₂/FIO₂ resulting from acute events unrelated to the disease process (Supplemental File, http://links.lww.com/CCX/A978). Chest imaging was mandatory by protocol to assess pulmonary abnormalities at study inclusion.

No ICU patients meeting these criteria were excluded regardless of age, gender, underlying disease, life expectancy, or duration of MV.

**Data Collection and Outcomes**

Day 0 was defined as the day that AHRF criteria were satisfied. We collected data on patient demographics, ICU admission diagnosis, etiology of ARDS, chest imaging, physiologic and laboratory results, management, and complications during ICU stay. We recorded duration of MV and calculated ventilator-free days (VFDs) from the day of study inclusion to day 28 (Supplemental File, http://links.lww.com/CCX/A978). MV, Sequential Organ Failure Assessment (SOFA) score (21), and general data were collected on days 0, 1, 3, 7, and the last day of MV (details in Supplemental File, http://links.lww.com/CCX/A978). Acute Physiology and Chronic Health Evaluation II score (22) was obtained during the first 24 hours of AHRF diagnosis. In the context of MV patients, ARDS was deemed to exist if patients fulfilled the Berlin criteria (23): an initiating clinical condition developed within 1 week of a known clinical insult, bilateral pulmonary infiltrates on chest imaging not explained by cardiac failure or fluid overload, and hypoxemia (Pao₂/FIO₂ ≤ 300 on PEEP ≥ 5) (details in Supplemental File, http://links.lww.com/CCX/A978). Patients were followed until hospital discharge.

Other standard good clinical practice according to established evidence-based guidelines was encouraged. In particular, physicians were encouraged to follow recommendations for lung-protective MV (24, 25) in all patients, which included: VT 4–8 mL/kg predicted body weight (PBW), ventilatory rate to maintain Paco₂ 35–50 mm Hg, plateau pressure (Pplat) less than 30 cm H₂O, and PEEP/FIO₂ combinations to maintain Pao₂ greater than 60 mm Hg or SpO₂ greater than 90%. Clinicians were also encouraged to follow usual critical care management, including antibiotic therapy and hemodynamic support, among others (details in Supplemental File, http://links.lww.com/CCX/A978). Data were collected and stored at each center and then sent de-identified to study coordinators. Demographics, physiologic and laboratory data, and severity scores were checked against standardized ranges at the coordinating center (details in Supplemental File, http://links.lww.com/CCX/A978); inconsistencies were corrected after discussion with site principal investigators.

The primary outcome was the prevalence of AHRF requiring MV. We calculated prevalence rates using three approaches: 1) per total ICU admissions, 2) per total mechanically ventilated patients, and 3) per ICU bed (details in Supplemental File, http://links.lww.com/CCX/A978). Secondary outcomes included prevalence of ARDS, ventilator management, all-cause ICU mortality, and use of adjunctive therapies (e.g., prone positioning and recruitment maneuvers).

**Statistical Analysis**

Since this was an observational study with no benefit/harm, we had no predefined sample size. Based on previous epidemiological studies by our group (5, 26, 27), we hoped to enroll at least 1,100 patients with AHRF (including ≥ 300 ARDS patients). With an estimated maximum screening rate of 15% of the total number of admitted ICU patients, we estimated that an average of 50 AHRF patients would be included in each ICU.

We used descriptive statistics to summarize binary (number and percentage) and continuous (mean and sd, median and P 25–P 75 ) variables. Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to check normality. We compared variables across groups using Student t test or Mann-Whitney U test for numerical variables and Fisher exact test for categorical variables. We report between-group differences and 95% CIs. The 95% CI for the difference between medians was estimated using a bootstrap procedure (10,000 replications). We assessed probability of cumulative survival to day 30 during hospitalization after study entry using the Kaplan-Meier method, analyzed with the log-rank test. Patients discharged alive from hospital before day 30 were censored. All time to events were defined from day of AHRF diagnosis. Missing data were not imputed. For all comparisons, a two-sided p value of less than or equal to 0.001 was considered a real effect.
Analyses were performed using R software, Version 4.1.1 (R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria).

**RESULTS**

Centers verified that during study periods, they screened every ICU patient for AHRF. There were 9,803 ICU admissions; 4,456 of them received MV. A total of 3,185 patients (71%) on MV had Pao₂/Fio₂ greater than 300 mm Hg during their ICU stay, 1,271 patients (13.0% of ICU admissions) met criteria for AHRF; 30 patients were excluded and 1,241 patients were enrolled (Fig. 1) representing an average of 3.3 AHRF patients/ICU bed. A total of 333 mechanically ventilated patients met Berlin ARDS criteria, representing 3.4% of ICU admissions, and 7.5% of patients who received MV. Median age was 65 years (P₂₅ – P₇₅ 54–74 yr); 67.2% were male. Main reasons for intubation and MV were cerebral pathology (head trauma, stroke, or coma), postoperative ventilation, pneumonia, and sepsis (Table 1; Table S1, http://links.lww.com/CCX/A978; and Fig. 1). Patients with postoperative ventilation and neurologic insults had other disorders (e.g., fluid overload, pneumonia, atelectasis, aspiration) as major mechanisms for hypoxemia.

Median days from ICU admission to AHRF diagnosis were 0 days (0–1 d). Mean values at AHRF diagnosis (day 0) for all patients were: Pao₂/Fio₂ 170.5 ± 64.1 mm Hg, Vt 6.9 ± 1.1 mL/kg PBW, Pplat 21.5 ± 5.4 cm H₂O, and PEEP 8.3 ± 3.0 cm H₂O (Table 1). At study entry, Vt was less than or equal to 8 mL/kg PBW in 86.1% (1,068/1,241), PEEP was greater than or equal to 8 cm H₂O in 59.4% (737/1,241), and Fio₂ was less than or equal to 0.7 in 71.4% (886/1,241) of patients. Clinicians largely chose ventilator strategies with low Vt (4–8 mL/kg PBW, PEEP 8–12 cm H₂O, Pplat < 30 cm H₂O, and avoided high Fio₂ [≥ 0.7] within the first 24 hr) (Fig. 2; and Table S2, http://links.lww.com/CCX/A978).

From 971 patients (78.2%) with recorded Pplat within the first 24 hours, only four patients (0.41%) were ventilated with Vt greater than 8 mL/kg PBW and Pplat greater than or equal to 30 cm H₂O (Table S3, http://links.lww.com/CCX/A978). Most ARDS patients (282/333, 84.7%) received PEEP greater than or equal to 10 cm H₂O (median, 12 cm H₂O; Pₒ₅ – P₇₅ 10–14) within the first 24 hours of ARDS diagnosis.

![Flow chart of patient screening and enrollment. ARDS = acute respiratory distress syndrome, AHRF = acute hypoxemic respiratory failure, MV = mechanical ventilation.](image-url)
### TABLE 1.
Baseline Characteristics and Outcome Data of 1,241 Patients With Acute Hypoxemic Respiratory Failure

| Variables                                      | Total Patients, n = 1,241 | AHRF Without ARDS (n = 908) | AHRF With ARDS (n = 333) | Absolute Difference (95% CI)* | p*  |
|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|-----|
| Age, yr, mean ± sd                             | 62.8 ± 14.3               | 64.5 ± 13.8                 | 58.0 ± 14.6               | 6.5 (4.7–8.2)               | < 0.001 |
| Sex, n (%)                                      |                           |                             |                           |                             |     |
| Men                                            | 834 (67.2)                | 591 (65.1)                  | 243 (73.0)                | 7.0 (1.9–12.1)              | 0.009 |
| Women                                          | 407 (32.8)                | 317 (34.9)                  | 90 (27.0)                 |                             |     |
| Reason for invasive MV, n (%)                  |                           |                             |                           |                             | < 0.001 |
| Head trauma/stroke/coma                        | 238 (19.2)                | 217 (23.9)                  | 21 (6.3)                  |                             |     |
| Postoperative ventilation                      | 208 (16.8)                | 182 (20.0)                  | 26 (7.8)                  |                             |     |
| Pneumonia                                      | 169 (13.6)                | 54 (5.9)                    | 115 (34.5)                |                             |     |
| Sepsis/pancreatitis                            | 152 (12.2)                | 75 (8.3)                    | 77 (23.1)                 |                             |     |
| Cardiac arrest                                 | 117 (9.4)                 | 109 (12.0)                  | 8 (2.4)                   |                             |     |
| Trauma                                         | 104 (8.4)                 | 59 (6.5)                    | 45 (13.5)                 |                             |     |
| Heart failure/fluid overload                   | 62 (5.0)                  | 59 (6.5)                    | 3 (0.9)                   |                             |     |
| Aspiration/inhalation                          | 49 (3.9)                  | 24 (2.6)                    | 25 (7.5)                  |                             |     |
| Others                                         | 142 (11.4)                | 129 (14.2)                  | 13 (3.9)                  |                             |     |
| Acute Physiology and Chronic Health Evaluation II score, mean ± sd | 21.0 ± 8.0 | 21.1 ± 8.1 | 20.9 ± 7.7 | 0.2 (–0.8 to 1.2) | 0.737 |
| Sequential Organ Failure Assessment score, mean ± sd | 8.9 ± 3.5 | 8.6 ± 3.4 | 9.6 ± 3.5 | 1.00 (0.6–1.4) | < 0.001 |
| \(\text{Pa}_2/\text{Fi}_2\), mm Hg, mean ± sd | 170.5 ± 64.1 | 182.6 ± 61.4 | 137.7 ± 59.9 | 44.9 (37.2–52.5) | < 0.001 |
| \(\text{Fi}_2\), mean ± sd                     | 0.63 ± 0.22               | 0.59 ± 0.20                 | 0.75 ± 0.22               | 0.17 (0.14–0.19)            | < 0.001 |
| \(\text{Pa}_2\), mm Hg, mean ± sd             | 98.9 ± 34.5               | 100.3 ± 33.9                | 95.3 ± 36.1               | 5.0 (0.7–9.3)               | 0.023 |
| \(\text{Paco}_2\), mm Hg, mean ± sd           | 46.1 ± 12.4               | 44.8 ± 11.7                 | 49.8 ± 13.5               | 5.0 (3.4–6.7)               | < 0.001 |
| pH, mean ± sd                                  | 7.32 ± 0.11               | 7.33 ± 0.11                 | 7.28 ± 0.11               | 0.05 (0.04–0.06)            | < 0.001 |
| Tidal volume, mL/kg predicted body weight, mean ± sd | 6.91 ± 1.12 | 6.95 ± 1.12 | 6.80 ± 1.12 | 0.15 (0.01–0.29) | 0.032 |
| Set respiratory rate, cycles/min, mean ± sd   | 19.8 ± 4.4                | 19.2 ± 4.2                  | 21.3 ± 4.6                | 2.1 (1.6–2.7)               | < 0.001 |
| Minute ventilation, L/min, mean ± sd          | 8.6 ± 2.1                 | 8.4 ± 2.0                   | 9.2 ± 2.0                 | 0.8 (0.6–1.1)               | < 0.001 |
| Positive end-expiratory pressure, cm \(\text{H}_2\text{O}\), mean ± sd | 8.3 ± 3.0 | 7.7 ± 2.6 | 10.1 ± 3.4 | 2.4 (2.0–2.8) | < 0.001 |
| Peak inspiratory pressure, cm \(\text{H}_2\text{O}\), mean | 27.3 ± 7.4 | 26.4 ± 7.3 | 29.8 ± 7.1 | 3.4 (2.5–4.3) | < 0.001 |
| Plateau pressure, cm \(\text{H}_2\text{O}\), mean ± sd | 21.5 ± 5.4 | 20.5 ± 5.1 | 24.0 ± 5.3 | 3.5 (2.8–4.1) | < 0.001 |
| Driving pressure, cm \(\text{H}_2\text{O}\), mean ± sd | 13.1 ± 4.7 | 12.8 ± 4.6 | 13.9 ± 4.9 | 1.1 (0.5–1.7) | < 0.001 |
| Number of extrapulmonary organ failure, median \(\text{P}_{25–P}_{75}\) | 2 (1–2) | 2 (1–2) | 2 (1–2) | 0 (–1 to 1) | 0.094 |
| Length of ICU stay, d, median \(\text{P}_{25–P}_{75}\) | 10 (4–21) | 8 (4–19) | 16 (8–27) | 8 (5–10) | < 0.001 |
| Duration MV from inclusion, median \(\text{P}_{25–P}_{75}\) | 6 (2–14) | 4 (2–11) | 10 (5–18) | 6 (4–7) | < 0.001 |
| Ventilator-free days from study inclusion, d, mean ± sd | 11.4 ±11.2 | 12.2 ±11.6 | 9.3 ±9.7 | 2.9 (1.5–4.3) | < 0.001 |
| Days from ICU admission to AHRF onset          | 0 (0–1)                   | 0 (0–1)                     | 0 (0–2)                   | 0 (–1 to 0)                 | 0.015 |
| All-cause ICU mortality, n (%) (95% CI)        | 438 (35.3)                | 322 (35.5)                  | 116 (34.8)                | 0.6 (–5.4 to 6.5)           | 0.837 |
| All-cause hospital mortality, n (%) (95% CI)   | 514 (41.4)                | 385 (42.4)                  | 129 (38.7)                | 3.7 (–2.5 to 9.7)           | 0.246 |

AHRF = acute hypoxemic respiratory failure, ARDS = acute respiratory distress syndrome, MV = mechanical ventilation.

*Absolute difference and \(p\) represent comparisons between AHRF without ARDS and with ARDS for each variable.

Plateau pressure was not reported at baseline in 169 patients (149 in AHRF without ARDS and 20 in AHRF with ARDS).
The degree of Vt variability (< 6, 6–8, > 8 mL/kg PBW) was not associated with ICU mortality: 39.7% (119/300), 33.9% (271/800), and 34.0% (48/141), respectively (p = 0.1911). Variability of PEEP (5–8, 9–12, > 12 cm H₂O) was not associated with ICU mortality: 34.2% (223/653), 35.1% (148/422), and 40.4% (67/166), respectively (p = 0.3247). In general, AHRF patients with and without ARDS had different values at baseline, overall the trajectory of these values over the first week was similar in both groups (lower SOFA, similar Vt and PEEP, lower FiO₂, improvement in Pao₂/Fio₂, and normalization of Paco₂ and pH) (Table S4, http://links.lww.com/CCX/A978).

Prior to study enrollment, 17.8% (221/1,241) were treated with noninvasive respiratory support. Patients received a number of interventions and adjunctive therapies (prone positioning, extracorporeal assist) (Table 2); these therapies were rarely used in non-ARDS patients. A total of 82 ARDS patients (24.6%) received prone ventilation; this represented 81.2% of patients (n = 101) with Pao₂/Fio₂ less than 150 mm Hg in the first 48 hours of ARDS onset.

A high proportion of patients developed respiratory and systemic complications (Table S5, http://links.lww.com/CCX/A978). Most patients had comorbidities
prior to ICU admission (Table S6, http://links.lww.com/CCX/A978). All-cause ICU mortality was 35.3% (438/1,241) and was similar in patients with ARDS (116/333, 34.8% [95% CI, 29.7–40.2%]) or without ARDS (322/908, 35.5% [95% CI, 32.3–38.7%]) ($p = 0.837$) (Table 1). Cumulative 30-day survival was somewhat lower in patients with non-ARDS than in ARDS (58.1% vs 65.5%; $p = 0.029$) (Fig. 3). There were no significant differences in ICU mortality (89/241, 36.9%) in patients diagnosed with ARDS at study entry (241/333) compared with mortality (27/92, 29.3%) of patients in whom ARDS was diagnosed during their ICU stay (92/333) (ICU mortality difference, 7.6%; 95% CI, –3.98% to 17.99%) ($p = 0.017$). Presence of pulmonary infiltrates/opacities on chest imaging at study entry was not associated with outcome whether or not ARDS criteria were met (Table S9, http://links.lww.com/CCX/A978). The most frequent cause of death was multisystem organ failure, commonly associated with limitation of therapeutic efforts (Table S10, http://links.lww.com/CCX/A978).

**DISCUSSION**

The main findings of this epidemiological study are: 1) about 12% of ICU admissions and 25% of MV patients
had AHRF; 2) there were almost three times as many patients without ARDS than those with ARDS; 3) all-cause ICU and hospital mortality were similar in both groups; and 4) the use of lung-protective ventilation was similarly applied in AHRF patients without or with ARDS. At the time this study was designed, the focus of lung-protective MV strategies was to target VT, although recent data suggest that targeting driving pressure or mechanical power may be more effective in mechanically ventilated patients (29, 30).

Previous prospective observational studies in patients with acute respiratory failure (Table S11, http://links.lww.com/CCX/A978) had large variability in the definitions and in the description of baseline characteristics and had a lack of clinically relevant information on management and complications (5–8, 10–12, 19, 31–36) (Table S11, http://links.lww.com/CCX/A978). Our prevalence of ARDS (3% of ICU admissions and 7% of MV patients) was similar to that reported in other studies (5, 12, 33) but much lower than reported in the Large Observational Study to Understand the Global Impact of Severe Acute Respiratory Failure (LUNG-SAFE) study (7). Our study also used the ARDS criteria defined by the ARDS Network and international societies’ criteria (24, 25). This differs from the LUNG-SAFE study in which more than half of patients did not receive proven or recommended approaches to lung-protective MV and adjunctive therapies (7).

There are a number of key findings in our study. First, about 25% of ventilated ICU patients had AHRF and only about a quarter of these patients had ARDS. Interestingly, all-cause mortality of patients with or
without ARDS was almost identical, despite a number of baseline demographic differences and diverse reasons for initiating MV. Other outcomes were different, with ARDS patients having longer duration of MV and ICU length of stay than non-ARDS patients. Our outcome data are in accord with Luhr et al (6) from 25 years ago, but their study differed in that they studied patients with acute respiratory failure, not just those with AHRF, and it was published before the modern era of lung-protective MV; thus, their patients were ventilated with higher Vt (applied as actual body weight) and much lower PEEP (Table S11, http://links.lww.com/CCX/A978). In a recent update of the LUNG-SAFE study (39), investigators reported that the overall hospital mortality of 4,499 mechanically ventilated patients with ARDS was 38.6%, but the definition of AHRF in that study excluded patients without parenchymal abnormalities.

Second, both ARDS and non-ARDS patients were ventilated with similar strategies (low Vt and low Pplat), suggesting that the diagnosis of ARDS does not affect the selection of specific ventilatory settings, despite the fact that there are very few specific RCTs aimed at non-ARDS patients (40). It is possible that clinicians opted for specific strategies for underlying physiologic reasons in non-ARDS patients or simply they opted to follow lung-protective ventilation strategies in the majority of patients with hypoxemia. There were differences in other interventions (recruitment maneuvers, prone position, neuromuscular blockade, noninvasive respiratory support prior to intubation) between groups. Although it is plausible that non-ARDS patients could benefit from some adjunctive therapies applied to ARDS patients, AHRF encompasses such a diversity of disorders that each requires specific or even personalized management.

Given the scarcity of studies addressing ventilatory strategies in non-ARDS patients, we suggest that the ICU community should increase research in those patients. We envision that in the future, there will be biomarkers in lung lavage, serum, expired gas or a combination, to better characterize and stratify AHRF patients, as well as to provide personalized therapy (41). In future studies, it would also be interesting to examine post-acute sequelae and functional outcomes in survivors of mechanically ventilated non-ARDS AHRF patients (42).

Our study has several strengths. First, it is a prospective study addressing the national prevalence and outcome of AHRF patients during the lung-protective era. Second, it is comprehensive providing data on: 1) patients with and without ARDS; mild ARDS, moderate ARDS, and severe ARDS, 2) ventilatory management (Vt, PEEP, Fio2, Pplat, and use of adjunctive therapies), and 3) clinical outcomes (including pulmonary and systemic complications, ICU/hospital mortality, and causes of death). There are, however, some limitations. First, our findings may not be generalizable to all countries since local ICU policies and regional patient demographics would influence clinicians’ performance. Encouragingly, a small pilot study conducted in Wales, employing the same methodology, found similar results (19). Second, this study focused on the acute phase of AHRF and data analysis was largely restricted to the first day of MV (as currently performed in most prevalence and outcome studies), although we did obtain outcome data until ICU/hospital discharge. Third, we only enrolled intubated and mechanically ventilated patients and excluded patients with hypoxemic respiratory failure treated with conventional oxygen therapy, high-flow nasal oxygen therapy, or noninvasive ventilation. We are confident, however, that no patients were excluded if they required intubation and MV during the study periods, despite being treated with noninvasive respiratory support prior to MV. Finally, we do not have detailed data on compliance by clinicians to lung-protective MV during the entire ICU stay, although our data on Vt, PEEP, and Pplat over the first 7 days of MV do not suggest that clinicians changed the practice of applying lung-protective MV from the time of intubation.

In summary, in this epidemiological study reporting adherence to lung-protective MV principles, we found that about 25% of mechanically ventilated patients had AHRF and about 75% of these patients did not have ARDS. Lung-protective ventilation was used in ARDS and non-ARDS patients, and overall mortality was essentially the same in both groups. Our data suggest that AHRF without ARDS is a common syndrome with a high mortality that requires specific studies into its epidemiology and ventilatory management.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Mr. Yasser and the Bendahan family for their support in loving memory of Lily Bendahan.

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Suárez obtained funding for the study. Drs. Mora-Ordoñez, and design. Drs. Villar, Añón, C. Fernández, and Rodríguez-Díaz, contributed to the initial study concept and design. Drs. Villar, Añón, C. Fernández, and Rodríguez-Suárez obtained funding for the study. Drs. Mora-Ordoñez, Soler, Mosteiro, Vidal, Ambrós, L. Fernández, Murcia, Civantos, Romera, Mira, Díaz-Domínguez, Montiel, Martínez-Carmona, Martínez, Pita-García, Robaglia, Bueno-González, Sánchez-Ballesteros, Pereyra, Hernández, Chamorro-Jambrina, Cobeta, González-Luengo, Parrilla, Nogales, M. M. Fernández, Arocas, C. Fernández, Valverde-Montoro, del Saz-Ortiz, Añón, and Olea-Jiménez enrolled patients into the study and participated in the data collection, data analysis, and the final draft of the article. Drs. Villar, R. L. Fernández, C. Fernández, González-Martín, and Slutsky are responsible for data analysis. Drs. Villar, R. L. Fernández, C. Fernández, and González-Martín had full access to all data in the study and take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis. All authors contributed to the final study design, or participated in its coordination, or participated in drafting the first article. All authors read and approved the final article.

This study is an investigator-initiated, academic, nonindustry sponsored, noninterventional, multicenter, observational study. Dr. Villar received grants from Instituto de Salud Carlos III, Madrid, Spain (PI16/00049, PI19/00141), The European Regional Development’s Funds, and Asociación Científica Pulmón y Ventilación Mecánica, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain; he received grant support from Maquet-Getinge for conducting a clinical trial on mechanical ventilation. Drs. Villar, Añón, and C. Fernández received grant support from the Instituto de Salud Carlos III, Madrid, Spain (CB06/06/1088). Dr. Slutsky is funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (grant number 137772 and FDN143285). The remaining authors have disclosed that they do not have any potential conflicts of interest. This study was approved by the Ethics Committees of Hospital Universitario La Paz, Madrid (#PI-2694) and Valladolid-Este (#PI17-594), Spain, and adopted by all participating centers, as required by Spanish legislation.

The study was considered an audit, and informed consent was waived, although two local sites required informed consent as per the institution’s policies. All data needed to evaluate the conclusions in this article are present and tabulated in the main text or the Supplemental File (http://links.lww.com/CCX/A978). This article is the result of an original, prospective, multicenter observational study in patients with acute hypoxemic respiratory failure requiring mechanical ventilation. For information regarding this article, E-mail: jesus.villar54@gmail.com

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APPENDIX

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