Characteristics and Outcomes of Frail Patients with Suspected Infection in Intensive Care Units: A Descriptive Analysis From A Multicenter Cohort Study

Akira Komori  
Juntendo Daigaku  
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8548-3707

Toshikazu Abe  
abetoshi111@gmail.com

Kazuma Yamakawa  
Osaka General Medical Center

Hiroshi Ogura  
Osaka Daigaku

Shigeki Kushimoto  
Tohoku Daigaku

Daizoh Saitoh  
Bouei Daigaku

Seitaro Fujishima  
Keio Gijuku Daigaku

Yasuhiro Otomo  
Tokyo Ika Shika Daigaku

Joji Kotani  
Kobe Daigaku

Yuichiro Sakamoto  
Saga Daigaku

Junichi Sasaki  
Keio Gijuku Daigaku

Yasukazu Shiino  
Kawasaki Ika Daigaku

Naoshi Takeyama  
Aichi Ika Daigaku

Takehiko Tarui  
Kyorin Daigaku

Ryosuke Tsuruta  
Yamaguchi Daigaku

Taka-aki Nakada
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Abstract

Background: Frailty is associated with morbidity and mortality in patients in intensive care units (ICUs). However, the characteristics of frail patients with suspected infection, including sepsis, remain unclear. We aimed to investigate the characteristics and outcomes of frail patients with suspected infection in ICUs.

Methods: This is a secondary analysis of a multicenter cohort study conducted by 22 ICUs in Japan. Adult patients (≥16 years) with newly suspected infection from December 2017 to May 2018 were included. We compared baseline patient characteristics and outcomes between three frailty groups based on the Clinical Frailty Scale (CFS) score: fit (score 1–3), vulnerable (score 4), and frail (score 5–9). We conducted subgroup analysis of patients with sepsis defined based on Sepsis-3 criteria. We also produced Kaplan–Meier survival curves for 90-day survival.

Results: We enrolled 650 patients with suspected infection, including 599 (92.2%) patients with sepsis. Patients with a median rating of 3 (3–5) on the CFS were included: 337 (51.8%) were fit, 109 (16.8%) were vulnerable, and 204 were (31.4%) frail. Comorbidities were more common in frail and vulnerable patients than in fit patients. The Sequential Organ Failure Assessment scores for fit, vulnerable, and frail patients were 7 (4–10), 8 (5–11), and 7 (5–10), respectively (p = 0.59). The patients' median body temperatures were as follows: fit 37.5 (36.5–38.5)°C; vulnerable 37.5 (36.4–38.6)°C; and frail 37.0 (36.3–38.1)°C (p < 0.01). C-reactive protein levels of fit, vulnerable, and frail patients were 13.6 (4.6–24.5), 12.1 (3.9–24.9), 10.5 (3.0–21.0) mg/dL, respectively (p < 0.01). In-hospital mortality did not statistically differ according to frailty (p = 0.19). Kaplan–Meier survival curves showed little difference in the mortality rate during the acute phase. However, more vulnerable and frail patients died after the acute phase than fit patients; this difference was not statistically significant (p = 0.25). Compared with fit or vulnerable patients, fewer frail patients were discharged.

Conclusion: Frail and vulnerable patients with suspected infection, including sepsis, tend to have poor disease outcomes after the acute phase of infection.

Background

Frailty is a clinical status and a multidimensional syndrome characterized by the loss of physiologic and cognitive reserves.1,2 Although the assessment of frailty is challenging,3–5 there are two major approaches to its measurement: the phenotypic frailty model and the frailty index of deficit accumulation.6 The phenotypic frailty model focuses predominantly on physical symptoms, such as weight loss, exhaustion, weakness, slowness, and reduced physical activity. The frailty index of deficit accumulation focuses on comorbidities, illness, laboratory abnormalities, and functional impairments.

There is a growing interest in the impact of frailty on patients with critical illness due in part to the increased risk of morbidity and mortality in patients with critical illnesses in intensive care units (ICUs).7
However, most previous studies have described the clinical features of frailty in the elderly\textsuperscript{8–10} or patients with heterogeneous diseases in ICUs.\textsuperscript{11–14} The specific clinical characteristics of frail patients with suspected infection, including sepsis, which is one of the major causes of admission to ICUs, are unknown.\textsuperscript{15}

Therefore, we aimed to investigate the association between frailty and patient characteristics, clinical features, and outcomes among adult patients with suspected infection in ICUs.

**Methods**

**Design and participants**

This is a secondary analysis of data from the Japanese Association for Acute Medicine (JAAM) Sepsis Prognostication in Intensive Care Unit and Emergency Room (SPICE) study, a multicenter study of patients with sepsis. The JAAM SPICE study was composed of a SPICE emergency room cohort and a SPICE ICU cohort. We used the SPICE ICU cohort. The SPICE ICU cohort included adult patients (aged ≥16 years) admitted to a participating ICU with a suspected infection. We excluded patients who had missing data on frailty.

**Data collection**

Data were collected by the SPICU ICU investigators as part of the routine clinical workup. Patient information included demographic characteristics, admission source, comorbidities, frailty, sites of infection, sepsis-related severity scores including the Sequential Organ Failure Assessment (SOFA) score and the Acute Physiology and Chronic Health Evaluation II score, and laboratory data. In addition, we collected data regarding in-hospital mortality, place after discharge, ventilator-free days (VFDs), ICU-free days (IFDs), and length of hospital stay (LOS).

**Definitions**

Suspected infection was defined as the administration of antibiotics and the sampling of any bacterial culture or imaging test undertaken for the purpose of investigating the source of infection. Sepsis and septic shock were defined on the basis of Sepsis-3 criteria.\textsuperscript{16} Frailty was evaluated using the Clinical Frailty Scale (CFS) score.\textsuperscript{1} The CFS score is a 9-point assessment tool used to quantify frailty. Clinicians determined patients' CFS scores by interviewing them or their surrogates and reviewing their medical records upon admission to the hospital. No training on the use of the CFS score was provided as the score was deemed to be easily understandable by clinicians. VFDs were defined as the number of days within the first 28 days after enrollment during which a patient was able to breathe without a ventilator. Patients who died during the study period were assigned a VFD score of 0. IFDs were calculated in a similar manner to the VFDs.

**Analysis**
We compared baseline patient characteristics and outcomes between three frailty groups based on the CFS score, fit (score 1–3), vulnerable (score 4), and frail (score 5–9), and evaluated the findings in light of previous reports.\textsuperscript{8,17} Continuous variables were summarized using the median and interquartile range (IQR) and compared using the Mann–Whitney $U$ test. Categorical variables were summarized using numbers and percentages and compared using the chi-squared test or Fisher exact test, where appropriate. Kaplan–Meier survival curves for 90-day survival were produced and compared using a log-rank test. We conducted a Cox proportional hazards regression analysis to assess the impact of frailty on 90-day survival. Adjusted variables in the analysis included age, sex, the Charlson comorbidity index, and the SOFA score, which were selected on the basis of clinical relevance and previous reports.\textsuperscript{8,11} We tested for interactions between frailty and age, frailty and the Charlson comorbidity index, and age and the Charlson comorbidity index. We also conducted a subgroup analysis of patients diagnosed with sepsis based on Sepsis-3 criteria. A $p$-value of $<0.05$ was considered to indicate statistical significance. All statistical analyses were performed with EZR (version 1.38; Saitama Medical Center, Jichi Medical University, Saitama, Japan), a graphical user interface for R (version 3.5.0; The R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria).\textsuperscript{18} EZR is a modified version of the R commander designed to apply statistical functions that are frequently used in biostatistics.

**Results**

We enrolled 650/652 patients with suspected infection from the SPICE-ICU database, after excluding 2 patients who had missing data on frailty. The median age of the patients was 72 years (IQR 60–81), and 369 (56.8%) were men. The median CFS score was 3 (IQR 3–5). There were 337 (51.8%) fit patients, 109 (16.8%) vulnerable patients, and 204 (31.4%) frail patients (Table 1 and Fig. 1). The age of patients increased with increasing frailty: fit 67 years (IQR 54–78); vulnerable 73 years (IQR 64–81); and frail 77 years (IQR 69–84), $p < 0.01$. Comorbidities including congestive heart failure, cerebrovascular diseases, dementia, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) were more common in vulnerable and frail patients than in fit patients ($p < 0.01$). The SOFA scores of fit, vulnerable, and frail patients were 7 (4–10), 8 (5–11), and 7 (5–10), respectively ($p = 0.59$). The patients’ median body temperatures were as follows: fit 37.5 (36.5–38.5)$^\circ$C; vulnerable 37.5 (36.4–38.6)$^\circ$C; and frail 37.0 (36.3–38.1)$^\circ$C, $p < 0.01$. C-reactive protein levels in fit, vulnerable, and frail patients were 13.6 (4.6–24.5) mg/dL, 12.1 (3.9–24.9) mg/dL, 10.5 (3.0–21.0) mg/dL, respectively ($p < 0.01$).
## Table 1
Characteristics of patients with suspected infection

|                       | Fit (CFS 1–3) | Vulnerable (CFS 4) | Frail (CFS 5–9) | p-value |
|-----------------------|---------------|--------------------|-----------------|---------|
| **n**                 | 337 (51.8)    | 109 (16.8)         | 204 (31.4)      |         |
| **Age at admission**  | 67 (54–78)    | 73 (64–81)         | 77 (69–84)      | < 0.01  |
| **Sex, male**         | 199 (59.1)    | 68 (62.4)          | 102 (50.0)      | 0.05    |
| **BMI (kg/m²)**       | 22.4 (20.0–25.0) | 22.5 (19.6–24.9) | 20.8 (17.8–23.6)| < 0.01  |
| **Coexisting conditions** |              |                    |                 |         |
| Myocardial infarction | 11 (3.3)      | 7 (6.4)            | 7 (3.4)         | 0.33    |
| Congestive heart failure | 20 (5.9)    | 11 (10.1)          | 28 (13.7)       | < 0.01  |
| Peripheral vascular disease | 9 (2.7)    | 7 (6.4)            | 7 (3.4)         | 0.17    |
| Cerebrovascular disease | 20 (5.9)   | 9 (8.3)            | 30 (14.7)       | < 0.01  |
| Dementia              | 12 (3.6)      | 15 (13.8)          | 48 (23.5)       | < 0.01  |
| COPD                  | 12 (3.6)      | 13 (11.9)          | 30 (14.7)       | < 0.01  |
| Connective tissue disease | 14 (4.2)  | 13 (11.9)          | 19 (9.3)        | < 0.01  |
| Peptic ulcer disease  | 13 (3.9)      | 1 (0.9)            | 10 (4.9)        | 0.19    |
| Diabetes mellitus without organ damage | 47 (13.9)  | 22 (20.2)          | 42 (20.6)       | 0.09    |

Reported counts (proportions) for categorical and median (interquartile range) for continuous variables.

Continuous variables were compared using the Mann–Whitney U test. Categorical variables were compared using the Fisher's exact test or chi square test, where appropriately.

Missing data: BMI = 5; Metastatic tumor = 1; Mechanical ventilation = 2; Systolic blood pressure = 2; Heart rate = 1; Temperature = 1; Hematocrit = 1; PT–INR = 5; Lactate = 15; Glucose = 6; Total bilirubin = 1; C-reactive protein = 2; Positive blood cultures = 37

CFS: Clinical frailty scale, BMI: Body mass index, COPD: Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, AIDS: Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, CCI: Charlson comorbidity index, SOFA: Sequential organ failure assessment, APACHE: Acute physiology and chronic health evaluation, PT-INR: International normalized ratio of prothrombin time
| Condition                                | Fit (CFS 1–3) | Vulnerable (CFS 4) | Frail (CFS 5–9) | P value |
|-----------------------------------------|---------------|--------------------|----------------|---------|
| Diabetes mellitus with organ damage    | 28 (8.3)      | 19 (17.4)          | 14 (6.9)       | < 0.01  |
| Chronic kidney disease                 | 19 (5.6)      | 20 (18.3)          | 16 (7.8)       | < 0.01  |
| Hemiplegia                             | 3 (0.9)       | 3 (2.8)            | 25 (12.3)      | < 0.01  |
| Malignancy (solid)                     | 30 (8.9)      | 19 (17.4)          | 28 (13.7)      | 0.03    |
| Malignancy (blood)                     | 6 (1.8)       | 0                  | 1 (0.5)        | 0.18    |
| Metastatic tumor                       | 6 (1.8)       | 4 (3.7)            | 5 (2.5)        | 0.46    |
| Mild liver disease                     | 8 (2.4)       | 11 (10.1)          | 9 (4.4)        | < 0.01  |
| Moderate to severe liver disease       | 13 (3.9)      | 1 (0.9)            | 9 (4.4)        | 0.26    |
| AIDS                                    | 0             | 0                  | 0              |         |
| CCI                                     | 1 (0–2)       | 2 (1–4)            | 2 (1–3)        | < 0.01  |
| SOFA score                              | 7 (4–10)      | 8 (5–11)           | 7 (5–10)       | 0.59    |
| APACHE II score                        | 18 (12–25)    | 22 (17–28)         | 21 (15–27)     | < 0.01  |
| Septic shock                            | 60 (17.8)     | 23 (21.1)          | 28 (13.7)      | 0.22    |
| Mechanical ventilation                 | 132 (39.3)    | 46 (43.4)          | 74 (36.5)      | 0.49    |
| Vital signs                             |               |                    |                |         |
| Glasgow coma scale                     | 13 (8–15)     | 11 (8–15)          | 12 (7–14)      | < 0.01  |

Reported counts (proportions) for categorical and median (interquartile range) for continuous variables.

Continuous variables were compared using the Mann–Whitney U test. Categorical variables were compared using the Fisher’s exact test or chi square test, where appropriately.

Missing data: BMI = 5; Metastatic tumor = 1; Mechanical ventilation = 2; Systolic blood pressure = 2; Heart rate = 1; Temperature = 1; Hematocrit = 1; PT–INR = 5; Lactate = 15; Glucose = 6; Total bilirubin = 1; C-reactive protein = 2; Positive blood cultures = 37

CFS: Clinical frailty scale, BMI: Body mass index, COPD: Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, AIDS: Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, CCI: Charlson comorbidity index, SOFA: Sequential organ failure assessment, APACHE: Acute physiology and chronic health evaluation, PT-INR: International normalized ratio of prothrombin time
|                              | Fit (CFS 1–3) | Vulnerable (CFS 4) | Frail (CFS 5–9) |
|------------------------------|--------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| **Systolic blood pressure (mmHg)** | 107 (87–128) | 105 (80–137) | 109 (86–128) |
| **Heat rate (/min)**         | 105 (88–125) | 108 (90–120) | 103 (86–118) |
| **Respiratory rate (/min)**  | 24 (19–29)   | 22 (18–27) | 23 (19–30) |
| **Body temperature (°C)**    | 37.5 (36.5–38.5) | 37.5 (36.4–38.6) | 37.0 (36.3–38.1) |
| **Laboratory data**          |              |                    |                 |
| White blood cells (/µL)      | 11000 (5780–15580) | 10520 (6700–16000) | 11780 (7450–17200) |
| Hematocrit (%)               | 35.4 (29.3–40.8) | 33.1 (26.8–39.1) | 34.4 (29.4–39.9) |
| Platelet (/µL)               | 16.3 (9.8–24.4) | 18.0 (11.2–24.3) | 18.1 (12.9–25.5) |
| PT-INR                       | 1.2 (1.1–1.4) | 1.2 (1.1–1.4) | 1.2 (1.1–1.4) |
| Lactate (mmol/L)             | 2.6 (1.4–4.4) | 2.7 (1.6–5.7) | 2.5 (1.4–4.4) |
| Glucose (mg/dL)              | 142 (112–205) | 150 (109–210) | 138 (103–194) |
| Sodium (mEq/L)               | 138 (134–141) | 138 (135–141) | 138 (134–141) |
| Potassium (mEq/L)            | 4.0 (3.6–4.5) | 4.0 (3.4–4.7) | 4.1 (3.6–4.6) |
| Creatinine (mg/dL)           | 1.5 (0.8–2.6) | 1.6 (0.9–2.9) | 1.2 (0.7–2.1) |

Reported counts (proportions) for categorical and median (interquartile range) for continuous variables.

Continuous variables were compared using the Mann–Whitney U test. Categorical variables were compared using the Fisher’s exact test or chi square test, where appropriately.

Missing data: BMI = 5; Metastatic tumor = 1; Mechanical ventilation = 2; Systolic blood pressure = 2; Heart rate = 1; Temperature = 1; Hematocrit = 1; PT–INR = 5; Lactate = 15; Glucose = 6; Total bilirubin = 1; C-reactive protein = 2; Positive blood cultures = 37

CFS: Clinical frailty scale, BMI: Body mass index, COPD: Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, AIDS: Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, CCI: Charlson comorbidity index, SOFA: Sequential organ failure assessment, APACHE: Acute physiology and chronic health evaluation, PT-INR: International normalized ratio of prothrombin time
Table 2 shows the outcomes among fit, vulnerable, and frail patients. There was no statistically significant difference in in-hospital mortality between the three frailty groups: fit 55/335 (16.4%); vulnerable 23/107 (21.5%); and frail 45/203 (22.2%), p = 0.19. There were no significant differences in IFDs, VFDs, or LOS between the three frailty groups. Frailty was associated with disposition after discharge (discharge to home: fit 125/280 [44.6%]; vulnerable 36/84 [42.9%]; and frail 40/158 [25.3%], p < 0.01).

|                          | Fit (CFS 1–3) | Vulnerable (CFS 4) | Frail (CFS 5–9) |
|--------------------------|--------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| Total bilirubin (mg/dL)  | 0.8 (0.5–1.5) | 0.8 (0.5–1.5)     | 0.7 (0.5–1.1)   |
| C-reactive protein (mg/dL) | 13.6 (4.6–24.5) | 12.1 (3.9–24.9) | 10.5 (3.0–21.0) |
| Positive blood cultures | 141 (44.2)   | 49 (47.6)         | 85 (44.5)       |
| Site of infection at final diagnosis | | | \< 0.01 |
| Lung                     | 103 (30.6)   | 39 (35.8)         | 81 (39.7)       |
| Abdomen                  | 74 (22.0)    | 21 (19.3)         | 35 (17.2)       |
| Urinary tract            | 49 (14.5)    | 13 (11.9)         | 44 (21.6)       |
| Soft Tissue              | 43 (12.8)    | 18 (16.5)         | 20 (9.8)        |
| Others                   | 35 (10.4)    | 9 (8.3)           | 7 (3.4)         |

Reported counts (proportions) for categorical and median (interquartile range) for continuous variables.

Continuous variables were compared using the Mann–Whitney U test. Categorical variables were compared using the Fisher’s exact test or chi square test, where appropriately.

Missing data: BMI = 5; Metastatic tumor = 1; Mechanical ventilation = 2; Systolic blood pressure = 2; Heart rate = 1; Temperature = 1; Hematocrit = 1; PT–INR = 5; Lactate = 15; Glucose = 6; Total bilirubin = 1; C-reactive protein = 2; Positive blood cultures = 37

CFS: Clinical frailty scale, BMI: Body mass index, COPD: Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, AIDS: Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, CCI: Charlson comorbidity index, SOFA: Sequential organ failure assessment, APACHE: Acute physiology and chronic health evaluation, PT-INR: International normalized ratio of prothrombin time
### Table 2
Outcomes of patients with suspected infection

|                      | Fit (CFS 1–3) | Vulnerable (CFS 4) | Frail (CFS 5–9) | p-value |
|----------------------|---------------|--------------------|-----------------|---------|
| **n**                | n = 337 (51.8) | n = 109 (16.8)     | n = 204 (31.4)  |         |
| **In-hospital mortality** | 55/335 (16.4) | 23/107 (21.5)      | 45/203 (22.2)   | 0.19    |
| **Dispositions**     |               |                    |                 |         |
| **Home**             | 125/280 (44.6)| 36/84 (42.9)       | 40/158 (25.3)   | < 0.01  |
| **Transfer**         | 155/280 (55.4)| 48/84 (57.1)       | 118/158 (74.7)  |         |
| **ICU-free days**    | 16 (0–22)     | 17 (0–22)          | 15 (0–22)       | 0.85    |
| **Ventilator–free days** | 21 (0–28)  | 21 (8–28)          | 20 (0–28)       | 0.71    |
| **Length of hospital stay** | 22 (10–49) | 23 (14–41)         | 23 (11–40)      | 0.86    |

Reported counts (proportions) for categorical and median (interquartile range) for continuous variables. Continuous variables were compared using the Mann–Whitney U test. Categorical variables were compared using the Fisher’s exact test or chi square test, where appropriately.

Missing data: In–hospital mortality = 5; ICU–free days = 41; Ventilator–free days = 41; Length of hospital stay = 5

CFS: Clinical frailty scale, ICU: Intensive care unit

Figure 2 shows the Kaplan–Meier survival curves stratified by the three groups. There was little difference in in-hospital mortality between the groups during the acute disease phase. However, more vulnerable and frail patients died after the acute disease phase than did fit patients, although this difference was not statistically significant (p = 0.25). Cox proportional hazards regression analysis did not demonstrate an association between in-hospital mortality and frailty (vulnerable vs. fit: adjusted hazard ratio 1.16 [95% confidential interval, 0.70–1.92], p = 0.57, frail vs. fit: adjusted hazard ratio 1.13 [95% confidential interval 0.75–1.72], p = 0.56), and there were no interactions between frailty and age, frailty and the Charlson comorbidity index, and age and the Charlson comorbidity index (Table 3).
Table 3
Univariable and multivariable analysis for mortality associated with frailty in patients with suspected infection

| Univariable analysis                  | HR  | 95% CI     | p-value |
|--------------------------------------|-----|------------|---------|
| Frailty                              |     |            |         |
| Vulnerable vs fit                    | 1.33| 0.82       | 2.16    | 0.25    |
| Frail vs fit                         | 1.36| 0.92       | 2.01    | 0.13    |
| Multivariable analysis               |     |            |         |
| Age                                  | 1.01| 1.00       | 1.03    | 0.04    |
| Sex, male                            | 1.10| 0.76       | 1.61    | 0.61    |
| Charlson comorbidity index           | 1.04| 0.95       | 1.15    | 0.39    |
| SOFA score                           | 1.18| 1.14       | 1.24    | < 0.01  |
| Frailty                              |     |            |         |
| Vulnerable vs fit                    | 1.16| 0.70       | 1.92    | 0.57    |
| Frail vs fit                         | 1.13| 0.75       | 1.72    | 0.56    |

HR: Hazard ratio, CI: Confidence Interval, SOFA: Sequential organ failure assessment

Among patients with suspected infection, 599 (92.2%) patients were diagnosed with sepsis. The subgroup analysis of patients with sepsis gave similar results to the primary analysis (Supplementary Tables 1 and 2). Similarly, there was no association between in-hospital mortality and frailty in patients with sepsis (vulnerable vs. fit: adjusted hazard ratio 1.22 [95% confidence interval, 0.73–2.04], p = 0.45, frail vs. fit: adjusted hazard ratio 1.26 [95% confidence interval 0.82–1.93], p = 0.29 [Supplementary Table 3]).

Discussion

We investigated the association between frailty and clinical characteristics and outcomes among patients with suspected infection in ICUs. Approximately one third of patients in this study population were classified as frail according to their CFS scores. Vulnerable and frail patients appeared to have poor outcomes after the acute disease phase compared with fit patients, although there were no differences between the groups in terms of short-term in-hospital mortality.

Some of the results of our study differed from those of previous studies. The proportion of elderly patients in our study was higher than that in previous studies; the median age of patients in our study was 72 years; in other studies, the median age was 62\(^{11}\) and 64 years\(^{12}\). However, the percentage of frail patients in our study was equivalent or lower than that in previous studies (31.4% vs. 29.5%\(^{11}\) and 43.0%\(^{12}\)). The higher proportion of elderly patients in our study may be explained by the fact that Japan has one of the world's oldest populations.\(^{19}\) Another explanation may be that our cohort included a large proportion of patients with sepsis.\(^{20}\) Regarding the prevalence of frailty, there may have been less frail
patients in this study because our study institutions were tertiary emergency care centers and only patients admitted to ICUs were included. Alternatively, it may have been due to the difference between the trajectory of sepsis and the trajectory of chronic diseases such as heart failure\textsuperscript{21} and respiratory failure.\textsuperscript{22}

We confirmed that frail and vulnerable patients had more comorbidities compared with fit patients. Comorbidities included congestive heart failure, cerebrovascular diseases, and COPD as well as those described in previous studies.\textsuperscript{23,24} Our results were very similar to previous reports that included heterogeneous diseases, although we selected patients with suspected infection only. There exists a controversy regarding the relationship between individual comorbidities and frailty.\textsuperscript{25} The combination of individual comorbidities and frailty may not be related to the primary disease, although it is natural that more comorbidities lead to greater frailty.

Our findings with regard to body temperature and C-reactive protein levels suggest that frailty may be associated with a poor acute inflammatory response. Some studies have reported that frailty was associated with chronic changes in the immune response, including the imbalance of decline in immune function and increased inflammation.\textsuperscript{26,27} Other studies have reported that aging was related to changes in the acute immune response due to dysfunction of immune cells or decreased cytokines working as a part of innate and adaptive immunity.\textsuperscript{28} Both frailty and aging may be involved in weakening the acute inflammatory response. Further studies are needed to clarify the relationship between frailty, aging, and poor inflammatory responses.

Regarding mortality, we found that more vulnerable and frail patients died after the acute disease phase, although this difference was not statistically significant. This tendency was consistent with previous reports.\textsuperscript{1,11} In the acute disease phase, disease severity may have had a greater impact on mortality than frailty. In the late disease phase, we did not observe the patients’ status after discharge, and frail patients who transferred to other institutions in the early disease phase may have subsequently died. Further studies are needed to assess the association between frailty and long-term mortality in patients admitted to ICUs with suspected infection.

Moreover, our study showed that mortality rates in vulnerable and frail patients were similar, whereas previous studies in ICUs demonstrated that the severity of frailty was associated with mortality.\textsuperscript{8,14} We may have provided a greater level of clinical care for very frail patients because the Japanese national health insurance system is universal. This may have contributed to the reduction of mortality among frail patients. Alternatively, the relationship between the severity of frailty and mortality may not have been linear among patients with sepsis. Mortality from septic shock is very high.\textsuperscript{15} Vulnerable and frail patients may have already been at risk of death. Further studies are needed to assess the association between the severity of frailty and mortality in patients with sepsis.

**Limitations**
This study had some limitations. First, fewer patients had CFS scores of 5 in our study compared with those in previous studies.\textsuperscript{8,11,14} There is a possibility that some CSF scores were misclassified. The CFS score is not widely used to assess frailty in Japan. Education in the use of the CFS score may have been necessary although the CSF has been found to be a reliable tool even if the assessor is different.\textsuperscript{30} Second, we did not follow up the patients’ outcomes after hospital discharge. We used the last observation carried forward. Third, we did not have information about treatments that may have been related to the patients’ outcomes in this database. However, most patients should have received appropriate treatments according to guidelines such as the Surviving Sepsis Campaign Guideline, which is used in national certified ICUs.\textsuperscript{31}

**Conclusion**

Among patients admitted to ICUs with suspected infection including sepsis, frail and vulnerable patients had poor outcomes after the acute disease phase; however, there were no statistically significant differences in outcomes between the three frailty groups.

**List Of Abbreviations**

CFS Clinical Frailty Scale  
COPD Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease  
ICUs Intensive care units  
IFDs ICU-free days  
IQR Interquartile range  
JAAM Japanese Association for Acute Medicine  
LOS Length of hospital stay  
SOFA Sequential Organ Failure Assessment  
SPICE Sepsis Prognostication in Intensive Care Unit and Emergency  
VFD Ventilator-free days

**Declarations**

**Ethical Approval and consent to participate**

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of all participating institutions at the Japanese Association for Acute Medicine (JAAM) SPICE study group. Given the
retrospective and anonymized nature of this study in the routine care, the Ethics Committees waived the need for informed consent from the study participants. The Institutional Review Board of Hokkaido University, a leading institution in SPICE, approved this study (approval no. 016-0386).

Consent for publication

Not applicable

Availability of data and materials

The datasets analyzed during the current study is available with the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Competing interests

All authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Author contributions

AK conceived of and designed this study, interpreted the data, drafted the manuscript, and revised the manuscript for important intellectual content. TA contributed to the acquisition of data, conceived of and designed this study, interpreted the data, and revised the manuscript for important intellectual content. KY contributed to the acquisition of data, conducted data cleaning, interpreted the data, and revised the manuscript for important intellectual content. SK, HO, DS, and SF contributed to the acquisition of data, jointly conceived of and designed this study, interpreted the data, and revised the manuscript for important intellectual content. All of the authors contributed to the acquisition of data, reviewed, discussed, and approved the final manuscript.

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Investigators of JAAM FORECAST Study Group

Nagasaki University Hospital (Osamu Tasaki); Osaka City University Hospital (Yasumitsu Mizobata); Tokyobay Urayasu Ichikawa Medical Center (Hiraku Funakoshi); Aso Iizuka Hospital (Toshiro Okuyama); Tomei Atsugi Hospital (Iwao Yamashita); Hiratsuka City Hospital (Toshiro Kanai); National Hospital Organization Sendai Medical Center (Yasuo Yamada); Ehime University Hospital (Mayuki Aibiki);
Okayama University Hospital (Keiji Sato); Tokuyama Central Hospital (Susumu Yamashita); Fukuyama City Hospital (Susumu Yamashita); JA Hiroshima General Hospital (Kenichi Yoshida); Kumamoto University Hospital (Shunji Kasaoka); Hachinohe City Hospital (Akihide Kon); Osaka City General Hospital (Hiroshi Rinka); National Hospital Organization Disaster Medical Center (Hiroshi Kato); University of Toyama (Hiroshi Okudera); Sapporo Medical University (Eichi Narimatsu); Okayama Saiseikai General Hospital (Toshifumi Fujiiwara); Juntendo University Nerima Hospital (Manabu Sugita); National Hospital Organization Hokkaido Medical Center (Yasu Shichinohe); Akita University Hospital (Hajime Nakae); Japanese Red Cross Society Kyoto Daini Hospital (Ryouji Iiduka); Maebashi Red Cross Hospital (Mitsunobu Nakamura); Sendai City Hospital (Yuji Murata); Subaru Health Insurance Society Ota Memorial Hospital (Yoshitake Sato); Fukuoka University Hospital (Hiroyasu Ishikura); Ishikawa Prefectural Central Hospital (Yasuhiro Myojo); Shiga University of Medical Science (Yasuyuki Tsujita); Nihon University School of Medicine (Kosaku Kinoshita); Seirei Yokohama General Hospital (Hiroyuki Yamaguchi); National Hospital Organization Kumamoto Medical Center (Toshihiro Sakurai); Saiseikai Utsunomiya Hospital (Satoru Miyatake); National Hospital Organization Higashi-Ohmi General Medical Center (Takao Saotome); National Hospital Organization Mito Medical Center (Susumu Yasuda); Tsukuba Medical Center Hospital (Toshikazu Abe); Osaka University Graduate School of Medicine (Hirosi Ogura, Yutaka Umemura); Kameda Medical Center (Atsushi Shiraishi); Tohoku University Graduate School of Medicine (Shigeki Kushimoto); National Defense Medical College (Daizoh Saitoh); Keio University School of Medicine (Seitaro Fujishima, Junichi Sasaki); University of Occupational and Environmental Health (Toshihiko Mayumi); Kawasaki Medical School (Yasukazu Shiino); Chiba University Graduate School of Medicine (Takaaki Nakada); Kyorin University School of Medicine (Takehiko Tarui); Kagawa University Hospital (Toru Hifumi); Tokyo Medical and Dental University (Yasuhiro Otomo); Hyogo College of Medicine (Joji Kotani); Saga University Hospital (Yuichiro Sakamoto); Aizu Chuo Hospital (Shin-ichiro Shiraishi); Kawasaki Municipal Kawasaki Hospital (Kiyotsugu Takuma); Yamaguchi University Hospital (Ryosuke Tsuruta); Center Hospital of the National Center for Global Health and Medicine (Akiyoshi Hagiwara); Osaka General Medical Center (Kazuma Yamakawa); Aichi Medical University Hospital (Naoshi Takeyama); Kurume University Hospital (Norio Yamashita); Teikyo University School of Medicine (Hiroti Ikeda); Rinku General Medical Center (Yasuaki Mizushima); Hokkaido University Graduate School of Medicine (Satoshi Gando)

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Figures
Figure 1

Distribution of Clinical Frailty Scale scores and prevalence of frailty among the enrolled patients. The number at the top of each graph shows the number of patients in each category.
Figure 2

Kaplan–Meier survival curves stratified by the three frailty groups. CFS: Clinical Frailty Scale. ICU: Intensive care unit

Supplementary Files

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- SupplementaryTable3.docx
- SupplementaryTable2.docx
- SupplementaryTable1.docx