Patient Characteristics and Acute PT and OT Utilization During the Initial Surge of COVID-19

A Retrospective Observational Study

Adele Myszenski, Romina Bello, Cynthia Melican, Nanette Pfitzenmaier

ABSTRACT

Objective: To describe the characteristics of patients and investigate the utilization of physical (PT) and occupational therapy (OT) intervention for those with a positive coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) diagnosis compared with other patient populations during the first 6 weeks of the novel coronavirus pandemic.

Methods: A retrospective, observational study of adult inpatients with a length of stay of 1 or more days at an urban hospital in Detroit, Michigan. Individuals with a COVID-19 diagnosis were compared with a cohort within similar diagnostic categories (respiratory, fever, and sepsis) but without COVID-19. Outcome measures included PT or OT intervention on 1 or more days, the timing of initial PT or OT visit, the average number of visits and units per patient, length of stay, discharge to home, and readmission within 30 days.

Results: Individuals with COVID-19 had lower rates of discharge to home \((P = .001)\), higher rates of readmission within 30 days of hospital discharge \((P = .01)\), increased hospital length of stay \((P = .001)\), and waited an average of 3.1 days longer for therapy evaluations than subjects in the comparison group \((P = .001)\). The percentage of subjects who had one or more PT or OT visits during their hospital stays was comparable between groups. Once therapy was initiated, the average number of visits per patient and dosing of units in 15-minute increments were similar between the 2 groups.

Conclusions: Patients acutely ill with COVID-19 hospitalized with the virus during the first 6 weeks of the pandemic remained in the intensive care unit and hospital longer than their counterparts without COVID-19 and had a delay in initiation of PT and OT intervention. PT and OT are important members of the care team for patients with the novel coronavirus. Understanding the descriptive characteristics of patients and therapy services during the initial surge could help improve utilization and patient outcomes.
METHODS

Study Population, Data Sources, and Variables
A retrospective comparative study was designed to identify baseline clinical characteristics of adults 18 years and older admitted to Henry Ford Hospital (HFH), an 877-bed, academic, level I trauma center in the inner-city of Detroit, Michigan, on or after March 15, 2020, and discharged on or before April 30, 2020. The period was selected to investigate subjects from the date of the first known admission of a subject with a positive COVID-19 diagnosis to the date when the daily admission rate began to decline. Subjects with a hospital length of stay (LOS) 1 day or less were excluded to control for patients who may have died or been discharged home within 24 hours of admission. Subjects who died at any time during the study period were also excluded.

Data variables were collected from the EPIC electronic health record and included age, gender, race, Medicare Severity Diagnosis Related Group (MS-DRG), hospital LOS, ICU LOS, average days requiring mechanical ventilation (vent days), average days requiring sedation medication, discharge disposition, rate of readmission within 30 days, date of first PT and first OT visits (timing), the number of PT and/or OT visits (frequency), and the total units of service provided in 15-minute increments (dosing). PT and OT evaluations are non-time based and reflect 1 unit of service.

A novel variable for identifying the presence of COVID-19 was used to stratify subjects into 2 groups. This variable is based on a positive polymerase chain reaction test of the nasopharyngeal specimen or the diagnosis of COVID-19 actively listed on the subjects’ EMR problem list. Group 1 included patients with a positive variable for COVID-19. Group 2 included patients with a negative variable for COVID-19.

Subjects were further stratified within each group to demonstrate a comparable patient population or diagnosis category between the 2 groups. At the time of this study, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services had not identified MS-DRG (related to COVID-19). The investigators found that 89% of subjects in group 1 were assigned to one of the following MS-DRGs: Respiratory System (MS-DRG 166-208), Fever (864), or Sepsis (870-871) diagnostic groups. Subjects were excluded if they did not have an MS-DRG within one of the identified groups (see the Figure).

The primary outcome variables compared were the percentage of subjects receiving 1 or more PT visits, 1 or more OT visits, discharged to home, and readmission within 30 days. Subjects requiring 2 or more days of ICU care and requiring mechanical ventilation were reported as well. For patients with 1 or more PT or OT visits, the primary variables were the number of days from hospital admission to the date of first PT and OT visit (timing; whether orders delayed or medically inappropriate), the average number of visits (frequency) and the number of units (duration of therapy) per subject.

Ethical Considerations and Consent
The hospital’s Institutional Review Board approved the study design and data collection methods. Informed consent was waived due to the retrospective nature of the study.

Statistical Analysis
All continuous data were tested for normality and were described using means and standard deviations, while categorical data were described using counts and
column percentages. Univariate 2-group comparisons were performed using 2-group t tests with 80% power, with a 2-sided \( \alpha \) level of 0.05, and were used to detect an effect size of 0.18, considered a small to medium effect. For categorical variables, a \( \chi^2 \) test was performed with 80% power used to detect an effect size of 0.18, considered a small to medium effect size, and a 2-sided \( \alpha \) level of 0.05. Statistical significance was set at \( P < 0.05 \). All analyses were performed using SAS 9.4 (SAS Institute, Cary, North Carolina).

RESULTS
A total of 2232 subjects were admitted to nonhospice or nonlabor and delivery units at HFH on or after March 15, 2020—the beginning of the surge of positive COVID-19 cases in Detroit, Michigan, and discharged on or before April 30, 2020, when admissions began to decline. The Figure describes subject selection into each cohort. Thirty-three percent, 751 subjects, met the criteria for a positive COVID-19 diagnosis, and of those, 568 subjects had not died and had a LOS greater than 1 day. Eighty-nine percent, 508 subjects, were assigned to an MS-DRG category within the Respiratory System (MS-DRG 166-208), Fever (864), or Sepsis (870-871) diagnostic groups. Of the 1481 subjects without a positive COVID-19 diagnosis admitted during the period studied, 375 had comparable MS-DRGs and met inclusion criteria of alive at discharge and an LOS greater than 1 day.

Subjects in both groups were of similar age and gender. However, a greater percentage of subjects with COVID-19 were identified as African American (\( P = 0.001 \)), had lower rates of discharge to home (\( P = 0.001 \)), and had lower rates of readmission within 30 days of hospital discharge from any setting (\( P = 0.01 \), as shown in Table 1. Subjects with a COVID-19 diagnosis were also found to have statistically significant increases in LOS (see Table 2). While subjects in group 1 were also more likely to have ICU stays or require mechanical ventilation, the difference was not statistically significant (see Tables 1 and 2).

### Table 1. Subject Characteristics

| Variable                              | Group 1: COVID Positive (n = 508) | Group 2: COVID Negative (n = 375) | \( P \) Value |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------|
| Gender: male                          | 53.2 (270)                       | 49.9 (187)                       | 0.335        |
| Age: \( \geq \) 70 y                  | 25.6 (130)                       | 21.3 (80)                        | 0.142        |
| Race: Black                           | 87.6 (415)                       | 78.2 (280)                       | 0.001*       |
| Discharged destination: home          | 78.2 (397)                       | 89.6 (336)                       | 0.001        |
| Intensive care unit length of stay, \( \geq \) 2 d | 20.3 (103)                       | 17.3 (65)                        | 0.271        |
| Mechanical ventilation required, \( \geq \) 1 d | 11.6 (59)                        | 8.3 (31)                         | 0.104        |
| Readmission within 30 d of discharge  | 11.0 (56)                        | 17.1 (64)                        | 0.01         |
| PT visits, \( \geq \) 1               | 27.4 (139)                       | 28.8 (108)                       | 0.638        |
| OT visits, \( \geq \) 1               | 26.0 (132)                       | 26.9 (101)                       | 0.752        |

*OTT, occupational therapy; PT, physical therapy.*

*Italicized value indicates statistical significance.

### Table 2. Subject Characteristics and Hospital Outcome Variables

| Variable                              | Group 1: COVID Positive (n = 508) | Group 2: COVID Negative (n = 375) | \( P \) Value |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------|
| Age                                   | 60.4 14.7 61.0 52-71             | 58.5 15.1 60.0 49-70             | 0.129        |
| Length of stay, intensive care unit, d| 1.6 4.4 0.0 0.0-0.0              | 0.9 3.0 0.0 0.0-0.0              | 0.171        |
| Length of stay, general practice unit, d| 4.6 3.6 4.0 2.0-6.0           | 3.5 3.0 3.0 1.0-5.0             | 0.001*       |
| Length of Stay, total hospital, d     | 7.3 6.2 5.0 3.0-9.0             | 5.4 4.4 4.0 3.0-7.0             | 0.006        |
| Duration of mechanical ventilation, d| 1.1 3.7 0.0 0.0-0.0             | 0.4 2.0 0.0 0.0-0.0             | 0.068        |
| Duration of sedation medication, d    | 1.0 3.3 0.0 0.0-0.0             | 0.5 2.0 0.0 0.0-0.0             | 0.232        |

*The interquartile range.

*Italicized value indicates statistical significance.*
TABLE 3. Characteristics of Physical Therapy Utilization

| Variable                  | Group 1: COVID-Positive Subjects With PT Visit (n = 139) | Group 2: COVID-Negative Subjects With PT Visits (n = 108) | P Value |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|---------|
|                           | Mean | SD | Median | IQR | Mean | SD | Median | IQR |
| Admit to first PT visit, d| 7.25 | 6.01 | 6.00 | 3.0-11.0 | 4.16 | 3.97 | 3.00 | 2.0-5.0 | .001* |
| PT visits per patient     | 2.92 | 2.64 | 2.00 | 1.0-4.0 | 2.83 | 2.21 | 2.00 | 1.0-4.0 | .656 |
| PT units of time per patient | 9.45 | 9.88 | 5.00 | 3.0-14.0 | 8.56 | 7.93 | 6.00 | 3.0-12.0 | .984 |
| Average PT units per visit | 3.95 | 0.89 | 3.00 | 2.0-3.5 | 2.80 | 0.07 | 3.00 | 2.2-3.2 | .102 |

IQR, interquartile range; PT, physical therapy.  
*Italicized value indicates statistical significance.

The percentage of subjects who had 1 or more PT or OT visits during their hospital stays ranged from 26% to 28.8% (group 1: 108 patients; group 2: 139), and this was comparable between groups (see Table 2). The timing of initiation of therapy services was significantly different, however. Subjects in the COVID-19 group had a first PT or OT visit an average of 3.1 days later for therapy evaluations than subjects in the comparison group. The average number of days from admission to first PT and first OT visit for subjects in the COVID-19 cohort was 7.3 days (SD = 6; interquartile range [IQR], 3.0-11) compared with 4.2 days (SD = 4.0, IQR, 2.0-5.0) for those in the comparison group. Table 3 displays the characteristics of PT utilization, and Table 4 displays OT. Once therapy was initiated, the average number of visits per patient and the average dosing of units in 15-minute increments were similar between the 2 groups. Subjects received an average of 2.9 visits per subject in the COVID group compared with 2.8 visits per subject in the non-COVID group. On average, for both PT and OT, 2.8 units or 42 minutes per visit were spent for subjects with COVID and 3.0 units or 45 minutes for subjects without.

DISCUSSION

PT and OT provide an important role in the care of acutely ill patients, including during a global pandemic of the novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, and its resultant disease, COVID-19. This study aimed to describe the characteristics of patients admitted to and discharged from a single acute care hospital setting in the epicenter of the initial COVID-19 pandemic surge and describe the utilization of PT and OT during the first 6 weeks of the pandemic in the state of Michigan. This study is novel in its research design to compare subjects with the novel coronavirus with those with comparable diagnostic groups (Respiratory, Fever, or Sepsis MS-DRGs). Evidence in literature, particularly in the patient populations of respiratory disorders and sepsis, concludes early mobility and PT are feasible and effective in the care of critically ill patients. Tables 1 and 2 describe characteristics for all subjects within those MS-DRGs and found subjects with COVID-19 had significantly longer inpatient lengths of stay and were less likely to be discharged home than subjects without COVID-19. The demographic findings align with all patients’ published clinical characteristics with COVID-19 at this hospital during the first 2 weeks of the surge and describe disproportionately higher rates of hospitalization of people of Black race due to COVID-19 in an urban academic hospital during the initial surge of coronavirus.

The investigators found that PT and OT’s utilization was similar for all subjects with an MS-DRG within the respiratory, fever, or sepsis diagnostic categories, with approximately one quarter of subjects receiving 1 or more PT or OT visits. Of those for whom PT and OT provided therapy, the average wait time for an evaluation for a patient with COVID-19 was 3.1 days longer. However, whether this was due to delays in order entry or due to

TABLE 4. Characteristics of Occupational Therapy Utilization

| Variable                          | Group 1: COVID-Positive Subjects With OT Visit (n = 132) | Group 2: COVID-Negative Subjects With OT Visit (n = 101) | P Value |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|---------|
|                                  | Mean | SD | Median | IQR | Mean | SD | Median | IQR |
| Admit to first OT visit, d        | 7.33 | 6.00 | 6.00 | 3.0-11.0 | 4.19 | 3.88 | 3.00 | 2.0-5.0 | .001* |
| Number of OT visits per patient   | 2.88 | 2.59 | 2.00 | 1.0-4.0 | 2.57 | 2.14 | 2.00 | 1.0-3.0 | .725 |
| Total OT units of time per patient | 10.14 | 10.16 | 6.00 | 3.0-14.0 | 8.25 | 8.06 | 6.00 | 3.0-10.0 | .323 |
| Average OT units per visit        | 3.25 | 0.87 | 3.29 | 3.0-3.8 | 3.00 | 0.73 | 3.00 | 2.7-3.5 | .002 |

IQR, interquartile range; OT, occupational therapy.  
*Italicized indicates statistical significance.
medical appropriateness is unknown. This finding was not unexpected due to reduced access to personal protective equipment and novel clinical guidelines, in which the delivery of care for patients with COVID-19 was initially limited to telehealth. However, by April 1, 2020 (3 weeks from the first admitted cases of patients with COVID-19), PT and OT delivery of care was at the bedside, in line with what is now described in recent publications. Additionally, the authors hypothesized that those patients diagnosed with COVID-19 would have less frequency of PT and OT visits due to isolation restrictions; however, the results show the average number of visits and units of time was comparable between those admitted with a COVID-19 diagnosis and those that were COVID-19 negative (see Tables 3 and 4). This finding suggests that skilled PT and OT are feasible in the care of patients with COVID-19.

Several limitations exist, including the short period of subject selection at a single hospital setting. Results may have been impacted by inconsistencies in personal protective equipment availability for therapists, causing delays in the provision of care and decreased availability of postacute rehabilitation facilities contributing to increased LOS. Additionally, the descriptors for utilizing therapy services are limited to assumptions of standard clinical practice guidelines, including mobilization, exercise training, and activities of daily living, rather than specific interventions. This study does not report functional mobility outcome scores or the presence of safety or physiologic events related to therapy. However, a follow-up study is under development that will include these variables with expanded periods and include patients from both urban and community hospitals.

To date, the clinical practice guidelines and roles of PT specific to COVID-19 are emerging. However, as of September 30, 2020, no published works exist that characterize or compare objective measures related to PT or OT. Descriptive and correlational studies are needed to understand and translate the effect and outcomes for patients with COVID-19. The authors wish to investigate novel questions that have arisen as a result of the pandemic. What effect will PT intervention have on those individuals who survive ARDS caused by COVID-19? Will differences in the functional outcomes of patients with ARDS and other pulmonary diagnoses in the presence of COVID-19 compared with those who did not have the virus be noted? Additionally, would the involvement of multiple organ system complications in patients with COVID-19 affect their long-term functional statuses?

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that PT and OT care to patients acutely ill with COVID-19 is realistic. The findings suggest that patients hospitalized with COVID-19 have poorer outcomes than those hospitalized with acute illness in similar diagnostic categories. Further research is needed to investigate PT and OT intervention’s long-term effects on patients affected by COVID-19. The authors plan to focus future research on the effects of PT and OT on functional mobility scores or the presence of safety or physiologic events related to therapy.

REFERENCES

1. Wu Z, McGoogan JM. Characteristics of and Important lessons from the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak in China: summary of a report of 72 314 cases from the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention. JAMA. 2020;323(13):1239-1242.
2. Schaller T, Hirschbühl K, Burkhart K, et al. Preliminary examination of patients with COVID-19. JAMA. 2020;323(24):2518-2520.
3. Remuzzi A, Remuzzi G. COVID-19 and Italy: what next? Lancet. 2020;395(10231):1225-1228.
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Interim Clinical Guidance for Management of Patients with Confirmed Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19). https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/clinical-guidance-managementpatients.html. Published 2020.
Accessed June 9, 2020.
5. First Affiliated Hospital ZUoS. Handbook of COVID-19 Prevention and Treatment. First Affiliated Hospital, Zhejiang University School of Medicine. https://esge.org/documents/Handbook_of_Covid-19_Prevention_and_Treatment.pdf. Published 2020. Updated March 20, 2020.
6. Shitashan G, Fadel RA, Malette KM, et al. Clinical characteristics and morbidity associated with coronavirus disease 2019 in a series of patients in metropolitan Detroit. JAMA Netw Open. 2020;3(6):e2012270.
7. Richardson S, Hirsch JS, Narasimhan M, et al. Presenting characteristics, comorbidities, and outcomes among 5700 patients hospitalized with COVID-19 in the New York City Area. JAMA. 2020;323(20):2052-2059.
8. McPadden J, Warner F, Young HP, et al. Clinical characteristics and outcomes for 7,995 patients with SARS-CoV-2 infection [published online ahead of print July 21, 2020]. MedRxiv. doi:10.1101/2020.07.01.9.20157305.
9. Nydahl P, Sricharoenchai T, Chandra S, et al. Safety of patient mobilization and rehabilitation in the intensive care unit. Systematic review with meta-analysis. Ann Am Thorac Soc. 2017;14(6):766-777.
10. Connolly B, O’Neill B, Salisbury L, Blackwood B. Physical rehabilitation interventions for adults during critical illness: an overview of systematic reviews. Thorax. 2016;71(10):881-890.
11. Connolly B, Salisbury L, O’Neill B, et al. Exercise rehabilitation following intensive care unit discharge for recovery from critical illness: executive summary of a Cochrane Collaboration systematic review. J Cachexia Sarcopenia Muscle. 2016;7(5):520-526.
12. Tipping CJ, Harrold M, Holland A, Romero L, Nisbet T, Hodgson CL. The effects of active mobilisation and rehabilitation in ICU on mortality and function: a systematic review. Intensive Care Med. 2017;43(2):171-183.
13. Parry SM, Nydahl P, Needham DM. Implementing early physical rehabilitation and mobilisation in the ICU: institutional, clinician, and patient considerations. Intensive Care Med. 2018;44(4):470-473.
14. Moss M, Nordon-Craft A, Malone D, et al. A randomized trial of an intensive physical therapy program for patients with acute respiratory failure. Am J Respir Crit Care Med. 2016;193(10):1101-1110.
15. Kayambu G, Roots RJ, Paratz JD. Early rehabilitation in sepsis: a prospective randomised controlled trial investigating functional and physiological outcomes the i-PERFORM Trial (protocol article). BMC Anesthesiol. 2011;11:21.
16. Kayambu G, Roots R, Paratz J. Early physical rehabilitation in intensive care patients with sepsis syndromes: a pilot randomised controlled trial. Intensive Care Med. 2015;41(5):865-874.
17. Herridge MS, Tansey CM, Mâtee A, et al. Functional disability 5 years after acute respiratory distress syndrome. N Engl J Med. 2011;364(14):1293-1304.
18. Bein T, Weber-Carstens S, Apfelbacher C. Long-term outcome after the acute respiratory distress syndrome: different from general critical illness? Curr Opin Crit Care. 2018;24(1):35-40.
19. Thomas P, Baldwin C, Bissett B, et al. Physiotherapy management for COVID-19 in the acute hospital setting: recommendations to guide clinical practice. J Physiother. 2020;66(3):32-35.
20. Felten-Barentsz KM, van Oorsouw R, Klooster E, et al. Recommendations for hospital-based physical therapists managing patients with COVID-19. Phys Ther. 2020;100(9):1444-1457.
21. Dean E, Jones A, Yu HP, Gosselink R, Skinner M. Translating COVID-19 evidence to maximize physical therapists’ impact and public health response. Phys Ther. 2020;100(9):1458-1464.
22. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. ICD-10-CM/PCS MS-DRG v37.0 Definitions Manual. https://www.cms.gov/icd10cm/version37-fullcode-cms/fullcode_cms/P0001.html. Published 2020. Accessed July 15, 2020.
23. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. Design and development of the Diagnosis Related Group. https://www.cms.gov/icd10cm/version37-fullcode-cms/fullcode_cms/Design_and_development_of_the_Diagnosis_Related_Group_(DRGs).pdf. Published 2019. Accessed July 15, 2020.
24. Liebl ME, Gutenbrunner C, Glaesener JJ, et al. Early rehabilitation in COVID-19—best practice recommendations for the early rehabilitation of COVID-19 patients. Phys Med Rehabil Kurortmedizin. 2020;30(3):129-134.
25. Morris PE, Griffin L, Berry M, et al. Receiving early mobility during an intensive care unit admission is a predictor of improved outcomes in acute respiratory failure. Am J Med Sci. 2011;341(5):373-377.
26. Schweickert WD, Pohlman MC, Pohlman AS, et al. Early physical and occupational therapy in mechanically ventilated critically ill patients: a randomised controlled trial. Lancet. 2009;373(9678):1874-1882.
27. Simpson R, Robinson L. Rehabilitation after critical illness in people with COVID-19 infection. Am J Phys Med Rehabil. 2020;99(6):470-474.
28. Keeney T. Physical therapy in the COVID-19 pandemic: forging a paradigm shift for rehabilitation in acute care. Phys Ther. 2020;100(9):1265-1267.
29. Iannaccone S, Castellazzi P, Tettamanti A, et al. Role of rehabilitation department for adult individuals with COVID-19: the experience of the San Raffaele Hospital of Milan. Arch Phys Med Rehabil. 2020;101(9):1656-1661.