RESEARCH ARTICLE

Using different methods to process forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV$_1$) data can impact on the interpretation of FEV$_1$ as an outcome measure to understand the performance of an adult cystic fibrosis centre: A retrospective chart review [version 1; peer review: 1 approved, 1 approved with reservations]

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Abstract

**Background:** Forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV$_1$) is an important cystic fibrosis (CF) prognostic marker and an established endpoint for CF clinical trials. FEV$_1$ is also used in observation studies, e.g. to compare different centre’s outcomes. We wished to evaluate whether different methods of processing FEV$_1$ data can impact on a centre’s outcome.

**Methods:** This is a single-centre retrospective analysis of routinely collected data from 2013-2016 which included 208 adults with CF. Year-to-year %FEV$_1$ change was calculated by subtracting best %FEV$_1$ at Year 1 from Year 2 (i.e. negative values indicate %FEV$_1$ decline), and compared using Friedman test. Three methods were used to process %FEV$_1$ data. First, %FEV$_1$ calculated with Knudson equation was extracted directly from spirometer machines. Second, FEV$_1$ volume were extracted then converted to %FEV$_1$ using clean height data and Knudson equation. Third, FEV$_1$ volume were extracted then converted to %FEV$_1$ using clean height data and GLI equation. In addition, %FEV$_1$ decline calculated using GLI equation was adjusted for baseline %FEV$_1$ to understand the impact of case-mix adjustment.

**Results:** There was a trend of reduction in %FEV$_1$ decline with all three data processing methods but the magnitude of %FEV$_1$ decline differed. Median change in %FEV$_1$ for 2013-2014, 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 was $-2.0$, $-1.0$ and $0.0$ respectively using %FEV$_1$ in Knudson equation whereas the median change was $-1.1$, $-0.9$ and $-0.3$ respectively using %FEV$_1$ in the GLI equation. A statistically significant p-value (0.016) was only obtained when using %FEV$_1$ in Knudson equation extracted directly from
spirometer machines. **Conclusions:** Although the trend of reduction in %FEV₁ decline was robust, different data processing methods yielded varying results when %FEV₁ decline was compared using a standard related group non-parametric statistical test. Observational studies with %FEV₁ decline as an outcome measure should carefully consider and clearly specify the data processing methods used.

**Keywords**
Cystic fibrosis, epidemiology, patient outcome assessment, forced expiratory volume

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**Competing interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

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Introduction
Cystic fibrosis (CF) is a multi-system genetic condition but the two main affected organs are lungs (resulting in recurrent infections and respiratory failure) and gastrointestinal tract (resulting in fat malabsorption and poor growth). Median survival has improved to 45 years, in part because of improvement in care quality. An important quality improvement initiative is benchmarking, which involves identifying high-performing centres and the practices associated with outstanding performance. Since forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV₁) is an important CF prognostic marker, it is often used as an outcome measure for benchmarking.

Different statistical methods of analysing FEV₁ data can yield different results, but there is scant attention paid to the methods of processing FEV₁ data. We previously reported a statistically significant reduction in %FEV₁ decline for our CF centre from 2013–2016. We now set out to understand the impact of using different FEV₁ data processing methods on our CF centre’s outcome.

Methods
This is a single-centre retrospective analysis of routinely collected clinical data from 2013–2016. Regulatory approval for the analysis was obtained from NHS Health Research Authority (IRAS number 210313). All adults with CF diagnosed according to the UK CF Trust criteria aged ≥16 years were included, except those with lung transplantation or on ivacaftor. These treatments have transformative effects on %FEV₁, thus may affect the interpretation of %FEV₁ decline.

Demographic data (age, gender, genotype, pancreatic status, CF related diabetes, Pseudomonas aeruginosa status, body mass index (BMI) and FEV₁ data were collected by two investigators (HZH and RC / HZH and MEG) independently reviewing paper notes and electronic records. Where data from the two investigators differ, the original data from paper notes or electronic records were reviewed to by both investigators to ensure the accuracy of abstracted data. This process ensures the accuracy of abstracted data and helps avoid potential bias from inaccurate or inconsistent data collection. FEV₁ data were processed with three different methods prior to analysis. First, %FEV₁ readings (calculated with Knudson equation and available in whole numbers) were directly extracted from spirometer machines. Second, FEV₁ volumes (in litres, to two decimal places) were extracted and clean height data were used to calculate %FEV₁ (as whole numbers) with Knudson equation. Third, FEV₁ volumes (in litres, to two decimal places) were extracted and clean height data were used to calculate %FEV₁ with GLI equation using an Excel Macro (Microsoft Excel 2013).

Best %FEV₁, i.e. the highest %FEV₁ reading in a calendar year for each study subject was used for analysis since it is most reflective of the true baseline %FEV₁. Year-to-year %FEV₁ change was calculated by subtracting best %FEV₁ at Year 1 from Year 2 (i.e. negative values indicate %FEV₁ decline and positive values indicate increase in %FEV₁). In addition to calculating year-to-year %FEV₁ change using three different FEV₁ data processing methods, %FEV₁ change calculated with GLI equation was also adjusted for baseline %FEV₁ using reference values from Epilemiologic Study of CF (ESCF). The ESCF study found median %FEV₁ change of −3%/year, −2%/year and −0.5%/year for baseline %FEV₁ ≥100%, 40–99.9% and <40% respectively. Adjusted %FEV₁ change was calculated by subtracting median ESCF %FEV₁ change from actual %FEV₁ change. Thus, an adjusted %FEV₁ change >0 meant the subject’s %FEV₁ decline was less than expected (indicating better health outcome) whilst an adjusted %FEV₁ change <0 meant the subject’s %FEV₁ decline was more than expected (indicating worse health outcome). %FEV₁ change from 2013–2014 to 2015–2016 calculated using different FEV₁ data processing methods were compared using Friedman test. Analyses were performed using SPSS v24 (IBM Corp) and p-value <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results
This analysis included 208 adults, with 147 adults providing data for all four years. Overall, the cohort was ageing but baseline %FEV₁ increased from 2014 onwards (see Table 1).

The %FEV₁ increase was in part due to younger adults with higher %FEV₁ transitioning from paediatric care because %FEV₁ tended to decline from year to year (see Table 2). However, different %FEV₁ decline results were obtained with different FEV₁ data processing methods. There was statistically significant reduction in the rate of %FEV₁ decline using %FEV₁ readings as recorded in spirometer machines (p=0.016). Cleaning of height data and standardisation of %FEV₁ calculation with Knudson equation did not alter the magnitude of %FEV₁ decline, but the p-value was no longer statistically significant (p=0.062). The use of GLI equation altered the magnitude of %FEV₁ decline although the trend of reduction in %FEV₁ decline persisted (p=0.135). Adjustment for baseline %FEV₁ further increased the p-value (p=0.210).

Discussion
We demonstrated that different centre-level %FEV₁ decline results were obtained using different FEV₁ data processing methods. In particular, year-on-year %FEV₁ decline was smaller in magnitude when %FEV₁ was calculated using GLI equation instead of Knudson equation. This is in part due to the demographic of our centre which has a relatively young adult population. A previous study found a near-linear %FEV₁ decline from childhood to adulthood with GLI equation, whereas there was accelerated %FEV₁ decline during adolescence and young adulthood when %FEV₁ was calculated with Knudson equation. One advantage of using the GLI equation, which is seamless across all ages, is that it improves the interpretation of %FEV₁ decline. Another advantage is that %FEV₁ decline can be adjusted for baseline %FEV₁ using ESCF reference values (since the ESCF values for %FEV₁ decline were calculated using the GLI equation).
Table 1. Characteristics of study subjects from 2013 to 2016.

|                          | 2013          | 2014          | 2015          | 2016          |
|--------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Excluded Lung transplantation, n | 6             | 7             | 9             | 7             |
| On ivacaftor, n          | 7             | 7             | 9             | 13            |
| **Included, n**          | **166**       | **170**       | **185**       | **186**       |
| Age in years, median (IQR) | 25 (19 – 31)  | 26 (20 – 32)  | 27 (20 – 34)  | 27 (21 – 34)  |
| Female, n (%)            | 76 (45.8)     | 80 (47.1)     | 87 (47.0)     | 90 (48.4)     |
| Genotype status: †        |               |               |               |               |
| ≥1 unknown mutation(s), n (%) | 11 (6.6)     | 26 (15.7)     | 13 (7.6)      | 16 (8.6)      |
| Homozygous class I-III, n (%) | 129 (77.7)   | 128 (75.3)    | 36 (19.5)     | 133 (71.9)    |
| Pancreatic insufficient, ‡ n (%) | 137 (82.5)   | 135 (79.4)    | 142 (76.8)    | 145 (78.0)    |
| CF related diabetes, † n (%) | 39 (23.5)     | 42 (24.7)     | 42 (22.7)     | 54 (29.0)     |
| **P. aeruginosa status:** †|               |               |               |               |
| No P. aeruginosa, n (%)  |               |               |               |               |
| Intermittent P. aeruginosa, n (%) | 60 (36.1)  | 57 (33.5)     | 74 (40.0)     | 78 (41.9)     |
| Chronic P. aeruginosa, n (%) | 37 (22.3)     | 36 (21.2)     | 31 (16.8)     | 29 (15.6)     |
| BMI, median (IQR)        |               |               |               |               |
| 22.3 (19.7 – 24.6)       | 22.7 (20.0 – 25.0) | 23.0 (20.3 – 26.0) | 23.2 (20.4 – 26.0) |
| Best %FEV₁, median (IQR) |               |               |               |               |
| 2013 to 2014 (n = 158)   | 78.7 (54.1 – 92.5) | 76.6 (54.4 – 89.7) | 77.8 (60.4 – 89.0) | 78.5 (58.5 – 89.6) |

† Genotype status as defined by international consensus. Homozygous class I-III mutations indicate ‘severe genotype’.
‡ Pancreatic insufficiency was diagnosed by the clinical team on the basis of ≥2 faecal pancreatic elastase levels <200µg/g stool and symptoms consistent with malabsorption, in accordance to the UK Cystic Fibrosis (CF) Trust guideline.
¶ CF related diabetes was diagnosed by the clinical team on the basis of oral glucose tolerance test and continuous subcutaneous glucose monitoring results, in accordance to the UK CF Trust guideline.
† Pseudomonas aeruginosa status was determined according to the Leeds criteria.

Table 2. Discrepancies in %FEV₁ decline with different methods of processing forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV₁) data.

| Methods of processing FEV1 data: | Change in %FEV₁, median (IQR) | Friedman test p-values |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| (1) %FEV₁, (calculated with Knudson equation) extracted from spirometers used for analysis † | 0.7 (–2.4 to 3.6) | 0.062 |
| (2) FEV₁ volume (L) extracted and height data were cleaned, then %FEV₁ calculated using Knudson equation † | 0.7 (–2.4 to 3.6) | 0.062 |
| (3) FEV₁ volume (L) extracted and height data were cleaned, then %FEV₁ calculated using GLI equation § | 0.7 (–2.4 to 3.6) | 0.062 |
| (4) FEV₁ volume (L) extracted and height data were cleaned, then %FEV₁ calculated using GLI equation, then change %FEV₁ adjusted for baseline %FEV₁ using ESCF reference values § | 0.7 (–2.4 to 3.6) | 0.062 |

ESCFS - Epidemiologic Study of Cystic Fibrosis
† The vast majority of the %FEV₁ data were from spirometers used at the Sheffield Adult Cystic Fibrosis (CF) Centre, which were calculated with Knudson equation in whole numbers. Some %FEV₁ data were from spirometers at the Pulmonary Function Unit which operationalised the Knudson equation differently, by calculating age to one decimal place to determine the predicted FEV₁. These spirometers also provided %FEV₁ to two decimal places, but this was rounded to whole numbers for the purpose of analysis. These results were presented at the 2017 North American CF Conference and were published as an abstract in Pediatric Pulmonology.
‡ FEV₁ volumes were available in liters to two decimal places from spirometers machines. Height data were also extracted to allow the calculation of predicted FEV₁, which led us to uncover the inconsistency recording of height, which affected 30–40% of the study subjects and would have introduced erroneous variability to the %FEV₁ because all equations for predicted %FEV₁ are dependent on height. Height data were cleaned to weed out error. Where there was uncertainty regarding the height, the higher value was used to obtain a conservative estimate of %FEV₁. To replicate calculation process of the spirometer machines at the Sheffield Adult CF centre, age was rounded down to a whole number and predicted FEV₁ in volume were calculated to two decimal places using Knudson equation. This was used to derive the %FEV₁, which was then rounded to whole numbers for the purpose of analysis.
§ %FEV₁, and height data were extracted as above. %FEV₁ was calculated using the GLI equation using an Excel Macro available at the European Respiratory Society website.

%FEV₁ calculated using the GLI equation as described above, then adjusted for baseline %FEV₁ as described in the ‘Methods’ section. An adjusted %FEV₁ change of >0 meant the subject’s %FEV₁ decline was less than expected for his / her baseline %FEV₁, indicating better health outcomes.
The limitation for all single-centre analysis is the potential lack of generalisability. Another limitation of our analysis is that the ESCF reference values used to adjust %FEV\(_1\) decline were derived using a cohort from around 15 years ago\(^6\), and may not represent the current population. Our results nonetheless highlighted that %FEV\(_1\) decline can be extremely sensitive to the FEV\(_1\) data processing methods. This is one of the challenges of using %FEV\(_1\) decline to infer quality of care. Another challenge is that %FEV\(_1\) lacks sensitivity as an outcome measure. A recent sample size estimation using the UK CF registry data suggests that 273 adults per centre are needed to detect a 5% FEV\(_1\) difference at the 95% significance level\(^7\). The sensitivity of measures used to detect variations in care quality is particularly pertinent to CF because a relatively small population is spread across many centres. Indeed, only 6/28 (21.4%) of all UK adult CF centres have ≥273 adults. That means process measures, e.g. medication adherence, is important to detect variations in quality of CF care. Mant & Hicks previous demonstrated that measuring processes of care proven in randomised controlled trials to reduce death allows detection of meaningful differences in care quality for myocardial infarction with just 75 cases, whereas 8179 cases would be needed if mortality was used as the quality indicator\(^8\).

Given the limitations of FEV\(_1\) as an outcome measure in CF, results of centre comparisons based on FEV\(_1\) data should be carefully interpreted. Observational studies with %FEV\(_1\) decline as an outcome measure should carefully consider and clearly specify the data processing methods used.

**Ethical considerations**

Regulatory approval for the analysis was obtained from NHS Health Research Authority (IRAS number 210313).

**Data availability**

Dataset 1: Sheffield forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV\(_1\)) data 10.5256/f1000research.14981.d205603\(^7\)

**Competing interests**

No competing interests were disclosed.

**Grant information**

The author(s) declared that no grants were involved in supporting this piece of work.

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Version 1

Reviewer Report 17 July 2018

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Pierre-Régis Burgel

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The authors performed a retrospective analysis of FEV1% predicted data over 3 years in an adult CF center in the UK. They examined FEV1 decline from year to year by calculating variation in best FEV1 during two consecutive years and examined the impact of using data obtained using Knudson equation (directly extracted from the spirometer or recalculated with the appropriate height) vs. GLI equation. They also performed an adjustment using ESCF data.

The authors concluded that trends in FEV1 decline were robust among methods, although the results were somewhat different using different methods/equations.

The study has some interest in highlighting problems associated with these type of calculations, especially when used for benchmarking (as in the UK).

I have the following comments for improvement:

1. An important drawback of Knusdon equation is related to the change of FEV1 in the transition from pediatric to adults. This is why the GLI is nowadays used in mixed pediatric/adult population. The authors used the UK definition of adults (over 16 years) and suggested that some of the difference in their results between Knudson and GLI data are due to the younger patients in this cohorts. I would be happier if the authors could perform a sensitivity analysis using only patients 18 years an over? This would minimize the Knusdon/GLI age bias and would make these results more relevant to the adult centres outside of UK. Looking at Table 1, it seems that only a minority of patients were below 18 years.

2. I think the word FEV1 decline is inappropriate in this manuscript. A year to year variation (even over 3 years) is not a decline. For calculating a decline, you would need multiple data points (at the very least 3 data points) and perform more complicated analyses (e.g., mixed model analysis). I would suggest to remove the word decline from the manuscript as the main goal of the authors did not appear to be FEV1 decline but mostly year to year FEV1 variation which is used for benchmarking in the UK.
Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Partly

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
No source data required

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Adult pulmonologist with experience in the care of adults with cystic fibrosis.
Researcher.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 12 Aug 2018

Zhe Hui Hoo, Northern General Hospital NHS Trust, Sheffield, UK

We thank Prof Burgel for the review and we will iterate the manuscript taking into account the two very useful suggestions, i.e.
1. we will perform a sensitivity analysis for the results in Table 2 using only adults aged 18 years and above
2. we will replace the term "FEV1 decline" with "year-to-year FEV1 variation"

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed

Reviewer Report 06 July 2018

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Edward McKone
Department of Respiratory Medicine, St Vincent’s Hospital, Dublin, Ireland

FEV1 as a percent of predicted is widely used as an outcome measure in patients with cystic fibrosis and is one of the metrics used to compare centres or countries in benchmarking exercises. This manuscript presents data showing that differences in data processing and the use of different reference equations used to estimate FEV1 as a percent predicted can result varying estimates of lung disease changes and potentially impact comparisons of centres/countries.

The paper supports the standardization of FEV1 collection and reference equations which is currently in development by CF International Registries. It also highlights that different approaches to data collection can impact the interpretation of statistical analyses.

Comments:

Differences in FEV1 percent predicted using different equations is well known (Rosenfeld et al and more recently in the cited UK/US comparison study). For this reason, the GLI have been recently accepted as the standard for most CF registries.

Although year to year subtraction is a method of looking at longitudinal changes, regression methodology is preferable to analyse these changes, especially, as in this case, where you have 3 time points. This also allows to adjust for baseline factors such as lung disease severity.

The method of adjustment for baseline lung function is a bit crude. The medians subtracted are from a US population over 10 years ago and are likely to overestimate lung function decline in this population. In the Morgan et al, J Pediatr 2016 paper cited, the benefits of using this type of adjustment was shown using regression.

Did their statistical approach factor in that these were repeated measures in the same patients?

Bland & Altman plots comparing different reference equations could be considered.

The results suggest that height inaccuracy is impacting the results. As this is a single centre study, it is difficult to determine is this is a more universal problem.

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Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Partly

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes
If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Partly

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

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**Author Response 12 Aug 2018**

**Zhe Hui Hoo, Northern General Hospital NHS Trust, Sheffield, UK**

We thank Prof McKone for the review and we will iterate the manuscript taking into account the suggestion to compare the different reference equations (Knudson vs GLI) using Bland-Altman analysis.

We concur the GLI has been recently accepted as the standard for most CF registries.

We concur that regression analyses is preferable to determine FEV1 decline. As recommended by Prof Burgel, we will replace the term "FEV1 decline" with "year-to-year FEV1 variation" in the revised manuscript.

We concur that the method used to adjust year-to-year FEV1 variation for baseline FEV1 is crude. The displayed data from the ESCF paper is only presented according to the four FEV1 categories, hence our choice of adjustment method. Given the limited number of subjects within the Sheffield dataset, we felt it is more appropriate to use reference values for suitably large datasets instead of simply calculating the predicted %FEV1 change using the Sheffield dataset. There are more recent reference values for FEV1 from the ECFSPR (Boëlle et al, 2012) and Canadian registry (Kim et al, 2018); however those papers do not provide reference values for year-to-year FEV1 variation.

Our statistical method account for repeated FEV1 measures since:
1. by using best FEV1, there is only x1 FEV1 reading per person per year
2. only x1 FEV1 reading per person was used to calculate the year-to-year FEV1 variation

As mentioned in the discussion section, we concur that a single-centre study may not be generalisable. However, inaccurate data recording within routine datasets (e.g. CF registries) is unlikely to be an isolated problem. For example, the letter by Hartley et al (2016) in JCF revealed that 6% of the adults with CF at the Manchester Adult CF Centre had incorrect genotype data recorded in the UK CF registry.

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed
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