Lung Mechanics in Type L CoVID-19 Pneumonia: A Pseudo-Normal ARDS.

Lorenzo Viola (lorenzo.viola@auslromagna.it)
Ospedale Maurizio Bufalini  https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8959-8357

Emanuele Russo
Anesthesia and Intensive Care Department, “M. Bufalini” Hospital, Cesena, Italy

Marco Benni
Anesthesia and Intensive Care Department, “M. Bufalini” Hospital, Cesena, Italy

Emiliano Gamberini
Anesthesia and Intensive Care Department, “M. Bufalini” Hospital, Cesena, Italy

Alessandro Circelli
Anesthesia and Intensive Care Department, “M. Bufalini” Hospital, Cesena, Italy

Luca Bissoni
Anesthesia and Intensive Care Department, “M. Bufalini” Hospital, Cesena, Italy

Domenico Pietro Santonastaso
Anesthesia and Intensive Care Department, “M. Bufalini” Hospital, Cesena, Italy

Giovanni Scognamiglio
Anesthesia and Intensive Care Department, “M. Bufalini” Hospital, Cesena, Italy

Giuliano Bolondi
Anesthesia and Intensive Care Department, “M. Bufalini” Hospital, Cesena, Italy

Luca Mezzatesta
Anesthesia and Intensive Care Department, “M. Bufalini” Hospital, Cesena, Italy. University of Messina, Messina, Italy

Vanni Agnoletti
Anesthesia and Intensive Care Department, “M. Bufalini” Hospital, Cesena, Italy

Letter to the Editor

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Abstract

Since its outbreak, in January, 2020, it has been clear that CoVID-19 pneumonia is atypical. Despite a full concordance to Berlin criteria for Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome (ARDS), respiratory system mechanics is preserved [1]. Mechanical ventilation and muscular paralysis are recommended in worsening respiratory insufficiency [2]; in a substantial number of cases, prone positioning significantly improves oxygenation.

Main Text

Little is known about isolated lung behavior in CoVID-19 pneumonia. Hence, the aim of this study is to analyze lung mechanical properties in the first hours after the beginning of mechanical ventilation and in prone and supine position.

A retrospective observational study was performed at Maurizio Bufalini hospital (Cesena, Italy). Patients hospitalized in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) from 03/23/2020 to 04/10/2020 were enrolled. The inclusion criteria were: age > 18 years, need of mechanical ventilation, need of muscular paralysis and < 48 hours of tracheal intubation.

After admission in ICU, a naso-gastric tube with an esophageal balloon (Nutrivent® - SEDA S.p.A., Mirandola, Italy) was positioned; the correct positioning and insufflation volume were tested with the occlusion method and measures were recorded with a multiparametric monitor connected to esophageal balloon and ventilator circuit (Optivent® – SEDA S.p.A., Mirandola, Italy).

Protective ventilation, defined as tidal volume (V_t) of 5–7 ml/kg predicted body weight (PBW), was used. Respiratory rate (RR) was set to tolerate mild hypercarbia (P_aCO_2 < 60 mmHg) and/or pH > 7.25.

Measures were performed at admission, then every six hours or just before placing patients in prone or supine position and one hour after the change of decubitus. An arterial blood gas sample was collected along with every evaluation. We stopped measuring when muscular paralysis was suspended. Ventilator settings were recorded; static parameters were obtained through a 3 seconds inspiratory and expiratory hold. Airway (P_{AW}) and esophageal (P_{ES}) pressure values were recorded and the latter was used to calculate transpulmonary pressure (P_L), as the result of the real-time subtraction of P_{ES} to P_{AW}.

Subsequently, compliance (C_{RS}, C_L), driving pressure (D_{P_{RS}}, D_P) and mechanical power (M_{P_{RS}}, M_P) related both to respiratory system and lung were calculated [3].

We report data of four consecutive patients who fulfilled the inclusion criteria; two more patients were enrolled and excluded from the analysis – one died and the other was suspended myoresolution after enrollment. In all patients, chest computed tomography (CT) showed interstitial pneumonia without loss of parenchymal aeration; patients were put on mechanical ventilation within 24 hours of hospital admission. In Table 1 are summarized the main clinical and ventilatory features for every patient.
The median time of observation was 54.5 hours. Patients underwent 1.5 median cycles of pronosupination, for a median pronation time of 30 hours. Median $V_t$ was 5.9 ml/kg PBW and median RR was 20 breaths per minute; $MP_{RS}$ was 17.9 J/min, while $MP_L$ was 13.1 J/min. Median $C_{RS}$ and $DP_{RS}$ were, respectively, 40.8 ml/cmH$_2$O and 9.7 cmH$_2$O. The same parameters, calculated using the transpulmonary pressure, led to a median $C_L$ of 53.1 ml/cmH$_2$O and a median $DP_L$ of 7.9 cmH$_2$O.

No statistically significant variation was observed in respiratory system ($C_{RS,SUP}$ 56.3 ml/cmH$_2$O; $C_{RS,PR}$ 41.5 ml/cmH$_2$O – $P$ 0.37) and lung ($C_{LS,SUP}$ 80.8 ml/cmH$_2$O; $C_{LS,PR}$ 53.2 ml/cmH$_2$O – $P$ 0.23) mechanics during prone positioning.

CoVID-19 pneumonia is peculiar: despite a severe hypoxemia, respiratory system mechanics is pseudo-normal [1]. Gattinoni et al. described a biphasic trend of the CoVID-19 pneumonia: in the initial phase – type L pneumonia – elastance is low, as well as recruitability, ventilation/perfusion ratio (V/Q ratio) and lung weight on CT scan. Conversely, in the second phase – type H pneumonia (20–30% of cases) – elastance, recruitability and lung weight are high and right-to-left shunt predominates [4, 5], thus framing in a classical form of ARDS. However, data regarding isolated lung mechanical properties in type L pneumonia are partial and disorganized.

We present preliminary data of a series of patients affected by type L pneumonia. Through the systematic evaluation of transpulmonary pressure, our findings seem to confirm the pseudo-normality of lung mechanics during the first days of mechanical ventilation and in different clinical settings. Even if lungs were severely damaged, the transpulmonary pressures remained below the thresholds commonly referred to as harmful [6], confirming a preserved lung aeration.

Another proof of the pseudo-normality of the respiratory system comes from the calculation of mechanical power [3]. Serpa Neto and coworkers found that risk for ventilation-induced lung injury (VILI) starts to increase from a value above 17 J/min [7]. Despite high ventilatory requests for maintaining acceptable $p_aCO_2$ and pH, in our series $MP_{RS}$ remained at a borderline value of 17.9 J/min. In an experimental study, Cressoni et al. found that VILI occurs with a $MP_L$ above 12 J/min [8]; our data show a median $MP_L$ of 13.1 J/min, that is slightly above the harmful value. Therefore, while standard protective ventilation is unlikely to lead to VILI, we cannot clearly define whether the ventilatory demands in type L pneumonia are injurious to the lung.

Type L pneumonia is characterized by a profound hypoxemia, in most cases dramatically responsive to pronation. Prone positioning involves a redistribution of transpulmonary pressure throughout the lung and an inflation improvement in well perfused dorsal areas, leading to an amelioration of ventilation/perfusion ratio (V/Q ratio) [9]. We evaluated the V/Q ratio through alveolar-to-arterial oxygen gradient ($A-aO_2$ gradient) and end-tidal $CO_2/p_aCO_2$ ratio ($EtCO_2/p_aCO_2$ ratio) [5, 10] both in prone and supine positioning, just before the decubitus change. As expected, pronation entails a reduction of V/Q mismatch ($A-aO_2$ gradient$_{SUP}$ 419 mmHg; $A-aO_2$ gradient$_{PR}$ 310 mmHg – $P$ 0.29; $EtCO_2/p_aCO_2$ ratio$_{SUP}$ 0.6; $EtCO_2/p_aCO_2$ ratio$_{PR}$ 0.71 – $P$ 0.63); of note, $C_{RS}$ and $C_L$ worsen throughout pronation time (Fig. 1). In
previous studies on primary ARDS, prone positioning did not substantially affect $C_{RS}$ nor $C_L$\cite{9}; although this finding seems to further confirm the peculiarity of CoVID-19 pneumonia with respect to ARDS, its statistical and physio-pathological significance is limited by the small amount of data and a more targeted research is needed.

In conclusion, our data underline the differences between classical ARDS and type L pneumonia, characterized by a pseudo-normal lung mechanics that deteriorates during prone positioning.
Table 1. Clinical features, ventilator settings and mechanical measurements of individual patients, in supine and prone position. BMI: Body Mass Index; I:E: inspiratory-to-expiratory ratio; PEEP: Positive End-Expiratory Pressure; \( P_{\text{plat}} \): plateau pressure; \( \text{PEEP}_{\text{tot}} \): total PEEP; \( D_{\text{RS}} \): Respiratory System Driving Pressure; \( C_{\text{RS}} \): Respiratory System Compliance; \( MP_{\text{RS}} \): Respiratory System Mechanical Power; \( P_{\text{L, end insp}} \): Transpulmonary Pressure at end inspiration; \( P_{\text{L, end exp}} \): Transpulmonary Pressure at end expiration; \( D_{\text{L}} \): Transpulmonary Driving Pressure; \( C_{\text{L}} \): Transpulmonary Compliance; \( MP_{\text{L}} \): Transpulmonary Mechanical Power; \( p_{\text{aO}_2} \): oxygen arterial partial pressure; \( F_{\text{I}O_2} \): inspired fraction of oxygen; \( p_{\text{aCO}_2} \): carbon-dioxide arterial partial pressure; A-aO\textsubscript{2} gradient: alveolar-to-arterial oxygen gradient; EtCO\textsubscript{2}/\( p_{\text{aCO}_2} \) ratio: end-tidal CO\textsubscript{2} to \( p_{\text{aCO}_2} \) ratio.

|                  | Patient 1 | Patient 2 | Patient 3 | Patient 4 |
|------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| **Clinical features** |           |           |           |           |
| Age              | 67        | 43        | 75        | 65        |
| Sex              | M         | M         | F         | M         |
| BMI (kg/m\(^2\)) | 24.5      | 28.4      | 31.3      | 24.8      |
| Comorbidities    | No        | No        | BPCO      | No        |
| **Ventilator settings** |           |           |           |           |
| Tidal volume (ml/PBW) | 5.9 (0)   | 6.2 (0.04)| 6.1 (0.3) | 5.9 (0)   |
| Respiratory rate (bpm) | 22 (4.5)  | 19.5 (2.5)| 20 (0.3)  | 20 (0)    |
| I:E (sec)        | 0.51 (0.2)| 0.48 (0.11)| 0.56 (0.11)| 0.64 (0.13)| 0.5 (0)   |
| PEEP (cmH\(_2\)O) | 12 (3)    | 12 (0)    | 10 (1)    | 11 (1)    |
| **Respiratory system mechanics** |           |           |           |           |
| \( P_{\text{plat}} \) (cmH\(_2\)O) | 19 (3)    | 20 (2.1)  | 21.8 (2.3)| 21.5 (1.5)| 23.6 (0.6)| 24.7 (0.3)| 23 (2.3)| 27 (3)|
| Parameter                  | Value 1 (SD) | Value 2 (SD) | Value 3 (SD) | Value 4 (SD) | Value 5 (SD) | Value 6 (SD) | Value 7 (SD) | Value 8 (SD) |
|---------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| PEEP_{tot} (cmH\textsubscript{2}O) | 12.4 (2.5) | 12.7 (0.4) | 10.9 (0.9) | 11.7 (1.3)  | 14.9 (0.2)  | 14.9 (0.1)  | 11 (3.7)    | 13 (2)      |
| DP_{RS} (cmH\textsubscript{2}O)     | 7 (0.7)     | 7.8 (1.4)  | 10.9 (1.4) | 9.8 (0.2)   | 8.7 (0.7)   | 9.8 (0.3)   | 12 (1.8)    | 13.8 (1)    |
| C_{RS} (ml/cmH\textsubscript{2}O)   | 60.1 (6.3)  | 57.2 (17.7) | 38.3 (3.6) | 39.8 (0.8)  | 44.6 (4.2)  | 40 (1)      | 35.4 (4.7)  | 33.1 (2.3)  |
| MP_{RS} (J/min)            | 16.9 (4.8)  | 16.4 (2)   | 15.7 (3.3) | 15.8 (2.3)  | 17.9 (0.1)  | 18.2 (0)    | 25.6 (7.2)  | 27.6 (8.8)  |

**Lung mechanics**

| Parameter                  | Value 1 (SD) | Value 2 (SD) | Value 3 (SD) | Value 4 (SD) | Value 5 (SD) | Value 6 (SD) | Value 7 (SD) | Value 8 (SD) |
|---------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| P_{L, end insp} (cmH\textsubscript{2}O) | 8.2 (3.2)   | 7.9 (3)     | 13.5 (2.2)  | 16 (1.9)    | 11.4 (2.6)  | 15.3 (0.2)  | 14.3 (1.5)  | 19.6 (7.6)  |
| P_{L, end exp} (cmH\textsubscript{2}O)  | 4.4 (2.2)   | 3 (1.5)     | 4.4 (2)     | 7.6 (1.6)   | 6.1 (2.1)   | 7.7 (0.5)   | 5.4 (1.7)   | 7.9 (5.8)   |
| DP_{L} (cmH\textsubscript{2}O)         | 4.4 (2.4)   | 5.2 (2.1)   | 9.2 (1.5)   | 8.4 (0.3)   | 5.4 (0.6)   | 7.6 (0.6)   | 8.8 (2.3)   | 11.5 (1.4)  |
| C_{L} (ml/cmH\textsubscript{2}O)      | 100.4 (54.5)| 81.5 (23.3) | 45.2 (7.4)  | 46.5 (1.7)  | 72.8 (8.4)  | 51.6 (4.1)  | 47.7 (9.6)  | 39.3 (4.6)  |
| MP_{L} (J/min)               | 11.8 (2.5)  | 12.4 (1.2)  | 12.2 (1.6)  | 11.6 (0.9)  | 12.6 (0)    | 13.6 (0.2)  | 16.6 (4)    | 20.1 (6.8)  |

**Blood gas analysis**

| Parameter                  | Value 1 (SD) | Value 2 (SD) | Value 3 (SD) | Value 4 (SD) | Value 5 (SD) | Value 6 (SD) | Value 7 (SD) | Value 8 (SD) |
|---------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| P_{a}O\textsubscript{2} (mmHg) | 90.6 (13.3) | 84.6 (53.6) | 75.3 (16.8) | 82.3 (12.4) | 141.8 (54)  | 164.6 (16.9)| 64.5 (17.8) | 75.9 (16.9) |
| F_{I}O\textsubscript{2} (%)    | 80 (22.5)   | 75 (17.5)   | 50 (2.5)    | 50 (0)      | 77.5 (22.5) | 70 ()       | 80 (10)     | 80 (5)      |
| P_{a}CO\textsubscript{2} (mmHg) | 68 (12.1)   | 58.1 (10.1) | 50.4 (1.5)  | 40.6 (0.2)  | 53 (5.6)    | 45.3 (5.3)  | 52.1 (7.7)  | 53 (10.3)   |
| pH                        | 7.23        | 7.28 (0.06) | 7.38 (0.03) | 7.41 (0.01) | 7.35 (0.04) | 7.37 (0)    | 7.22 (0.05) | 7.24 (0.06) |
| Abbreviations |
|---------------|
| **A-aO₂ gradient**: Alveolar-to-arterial Oxygen gradient |
| **ARDS**: Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome |
| **CₐS**: Respiratory System Compliance |
| **CₐS,SUP**: Respiratory System Compliance, Supine |
| **CₐS,PR**: Respiratory System Compliance, Prone |
| **Cₐ**: Transpulmonary Compliance |
| **Cₐ,SUP**: Transpulmonary Compliance, Supine |
| **Cₐ,PR**: Transpulmonary Compliance, Prone |
| **CoVID-19**: Coronavirus Infectious Disease-19 |
| **CT**: Computed Tomography |
| **DPRₐ**: Respiratory System Driving Pressure |
| **Dₐ**: Transpulmonary Driving Pressure |
| **EtCO₂/pₐCO₂ ratio**: end-tidal CO₂/pₐCO₂ ratio |
| **ICU**: Intensive Care Unit |
| **MRₐ**: Respiratory System Mechanical Power |
| **MRₐ**: Transpulmonary Mechanical Power |
| **pₐCO₂**: carbon dioxide arterial partial pressure |
Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate:
this study was approved by the Ethical Committee of AUSL Romagna.

Consent for publication:
not applicable.

Availability of data and materials:
the datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Competing interests:
the authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Authors’ contributions:
LV: study design, data collection, writing of the manuscript; ER: study design, writing of the manuscript; MB: study design, data collection; EG: data collection; AC: data collection; LB: data collection; DPS: data collection; GS: data collection; GB: data collection; LM: data collection; VA: study design, writing of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Figures
Figure 1

Mechanical and Ventilation/Perfusion ratio variations in supine and prone positioning, just before decubitus change. CRS: Respiratory System Compliance; CL: Transpulmonary Compliance; A-aO2 gradient: alveolar-to-arterial oxygen gradient; EtCO2/paCO2 ratio: end-tidal CO2 to paCO2 ratio.