

Making sense of the pressure of arterial oxygen to fractional inspired oxygen concentration ratio in patients with acute respiratory distress syndrome

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Abstract

Introduction

The pressure of arterial oxygen to fractional inspired oxygen concentration ($\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$) ratio is a commonly used indicator of lung function in critically ill patients. For many years, physicians have relied on it to define and characterise the severity of the acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), and this ratio is still a central element of the new ARDS definition (Berlin definition). In addition, clinicians utilise this ratio to track change in lung conditions, to set positive end expiratory pressure, to assess the response to different ventilatory strategies and/or to make decisions regarding the requirement for advanced supportive treatment modalities (e.g., paralysis, prone position, extracorporeal membrane oxygenation). Despite having the merit of simplicity and availability, the $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$ is more complex to interpret than being acknowledged and can at times be misleading. This risk is particularly present if one does not understand or consider the key determinants of the $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$ ratio in each individual patient and why this ratio may change over time. We review here the main determinants of $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$ ratio and discuss how the application of a few physiological key concepts can be used to optimise the management of patients with hypoxic respiratory failure.

Conclusion

We need a more individualised approach of hypoxic respiratory failure and ARDS. It is questionable that the new Berlin ARDS definition was the most required change to our approach of ARDS. One could argue that our patients could be better off, if we had moved away from trying to find commonality between very different conditions as the old and new ARDS definitions do. The 'one size fits all' approach tried for many years has not led to substantial progress. It may be high time for a different strategy and during the mean time, it may also be wise to use physiology as a compass to avoid the obvious mistakes associated with a cookbook approach.

Introduction

In the absence of a direct reliable marker of lung injury, gas exchange is commonly used to define respiratory failure (e.g., hypoxic versus hypercapnic), as well as the degree of lung dysfunction/injury (e.g., mild to severe acute respiratory distress syndrome [ARDS]). For hypoxic respiratory failure, in general and ARDS in particular, the pressure of arterial oxygen to fractional inspired oxygen concentration ($\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$) ratio is the most commonly reported index of gas exchange impairment and is a central element of the ARDS definition¹. The recent revised definition (the so-called Berlin definition) has not changed its importance as the $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$ ratio is still required to define ARDS and to characterise its severity (mild, moderate or severe)². This ratio is also used to identify the ARDS population, who is the most likely to benefit from specific

supportive modalities, such as prone positioning or paralysis. Finally, this ratio is also commonly calculated at the bedside to track the course of ARDS or the response to specific intervention, and to help set positive end expiratory pressure (PEEP) level in individual patients.

Despite its simplicity and availability, the $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$ ratio can be complex to interpret and misleading at the bedside if one does not understand or consider its various physiological determinants. We review here the key determinants of $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$ ratio and we propose an approach aiming at understanding its meaning in specific patients. We believe that this is important to optimise the management of patients with ARDS.

Discussion

The pressure of arterial oxygen to fractional inspired oxygen concentration and the acute respiratory distress syndrome definition

A detailed discussion of the Berlin definition of ARDS is beyond the scope of this critical review. However, it is relevant to stress the fact that the new ARDS definition mandates this ratio to be less than 300². In addition, the assessment of ARDS severity relies entirely on this ratio (≤ 300 and >200 mild ARDS, ≤ 200 and >100 moderate ARDS, ≤ 100 severe ARDS) measured on a PEEP ≥ 5 cm H₂O. Although the mild, moderate and severe ARDS of the Berlin definition were found to be associated with different mortality (27%; 95% confidence interval [CI], 24%–30%; 32%; 95% CI, 29%–34%; and 45%; 95% CI, 42%–48%, respectively; $p < 0.001$) and with increased median duration of mechanical ventilation in

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survivors, it is important to emphasise that such association cannot be extrapolated to individual patients. In addition, the definition lacks standardisation in regard to the key determinants of $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$, such as the FIO_2 and PEEP used to measure PaO_2 ³. This is problematic for reasons discussed below.

Determinant of the pressure of arterial oxygen to fractional inspired oxygen concentration ratio in patients with acute respiratory distress syndrome

To appreciate the limitation of applying this ratio to characterise the degree of lung injury in a given patient and to understand that sometimes this ratio changes overtime irrespective of the degree of lung injury, it is important to review the key clinical factors that determine the $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$ ratio in the critically ill patients (see Table 1).

In a healthy individual, the main determinant of the PaO_2 is the alveolar O_2 content (PAO_2). When the ventilation to perfusion (V/Q) ratio is close to 1 and therefore only a negligible shunt (perfusion of non-

ventilated lung units) is present, the venous blood becomes fully oxygenated and largely independent of the mixed venous O_2 content as the PaO_2 becomes identical to the PAO_2 . One of the hallmarks of ARDS is the presence of shunt⁴. Shunt and venous admixtures are used here interchangeably to express the calculated fraction of the cardiac output that bypasses the alveolar units and that contributes to the mixing of the poorly oxygenated venous blood, with the capillary oxygenated one. In contrast to the PaO_2 of the healthy individuals, the one of ARDS patients varies significantly with the degree of V/Q mismatch and/or shunt present and the mixed venous blood O_2 content. As the shunt increases, the PaO_2 tends to become less and less sensitive to the PAO_2 and to the FIO_2 and more and more dependent on the mixed venous O_2 content and saturation. This is due to the fact that the arterial and venous O_2 blood content and saturation tend to become more and more alike as the shunt fraction increases (Figure 1).

The degree of shunt can be viewed as determined and modulated by factors that affect the number of alveolar units that are non-ventilated (V factors) and/or the perfusion of those units (Q factors), as we shall now discuss.

Ventilation (V) factors

In patients with ARDS, non-aerated alveolar units contributing to shunt physiology are mainly the result of alveolar flooding (by oedema, pus or blood) or collapse. Although some units can be easily recruited (e.g., collapsed alveoli) by increasing the transpulmonary pressure, others resist recruitment⁵ (e.g., alveoli are filled with pus in the setting of a pneumonia). As a result, the degree of recruitable lung units varies among patients with ARDS⁶ and within the same patient over the course of the disease (more recruitable lung early and less later on).

This has important implications. Firstly, depending on the ventilatory strategy used and the degree of recruitable lung at hand, the $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$ ratio may vary greatly. This is well illustrated by the study of

Table 1 Key determinant of the $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$ in patients with ARDS.

| $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$ ratio determinants | Corresponding primary modulating factors | Corresponding secondary modulating factors | Common mechanisms |
|--|--|---|---|
| PaO_2 | Alveolar PO_2 | FIO_2 | Change in FIO_2 |
| | Shunt | V factors | Size of the 'baby' lung, recruitability and ventilatory strategy (e.g., PEEP) |
| | | Q factors | Hypoxia vasoconstriction, airway pressure, position |
| | Mixed venous O_2 content | O_2 delivery | Reduced cardiac output, reduced hemoglobin, reduced O_2 saturation |
| | | O_2 consumption | Increased O_2 extraction |
| FIO_2 | Target PaO_2 | Physician dependent | |
| $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$ | FIO_2 | The effect of the FIO_2 on this ratio is quite variable depending for instance on the degree of shunt (change in opposite direction) | Arterio-venous difference or Change in degree of shunt |

ARDS, acute respiratory distress syndrome; PEEP, positive end expiratory pressure.

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redistribute blood flow to the aerated lung and thus, to reduce venous admixture¹⁵. Finally, the application of excessive airway pressure on an aerated compliant lung (when the other one is extensively consolidated and non-compliant) results in alveolar vessel compression in the good lung, in redistribution of blood flow to the bad one and in increasing shunt. The wide range of correlations reported ($r = 0.5-0.9$) between the $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$ ratio and degree of shunt¹⁶ points toward $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$ ratio modulator factors other than shunt alone, as we shall now discuss.

Extra pulmonary factors: mixed venous oxygen content, cardiac output and cardiac shunt

As discussed above, mixed venous O_2 content together with the percentage of cardiac output that bypasses aerated lung units (venous admixture) are key determinants of the PaO_2 , arterial O_2 saturation and content in patients with ARDS (see Figure 1). As the mixed venous O_2 content and saturation decrease, so does the arterial PaO_2 in the setting of shunt physiology. It follows that any primary increase in tissue consumption (VO_2) or reduction in tissue oxygen delivery (DO_2) associated with a compensatory increased in O_2 extraction may cause a drop in the mixed venous PO_2 , O_2 content and saturation and therefore, in the PaO_2 . This effect is trivial for a small pulmonary shunt, but significant for a large one. In ARDS patients, a drop in cardiac output is not an uncommon cause of decreased PaO_2 . This should be suspected in all patients, who developed a drop in O_2 saturation, with unchanged respiratory system mechanics, particularly if it is associated with hypotension. The effect of an increase in CO on the mixed venous O_2 is more complex as the resulting increase in the mixed venous PO_2 , saturation and O_2 content may be offset by the greater shunt associated with the higher CO¹⁷.

It is important to consider the cardiac output and the relationship between O_2 delivery and demand as a potential cause of a change in PaO_2 in ARDS. For instance, if a patient meets severe ARDS criteria mainly due to a low CO and reduced mixed venous O_2 saturation as opposed to a large shunt, the priority would be to restore an adequate haemodynamic and not to embark on recruitment manoeuvres or extracorporeal membrane oxygenation. Not distinguishing the different mechanisms and the cause for reaching a $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$ less than 100 may thus, lead to very inappropriate intervention (increasing the PEEP in a patient with low CO due to decompensated cor pulmonale). It is also worth remembering that cor pulmonale (which has been reported to be present in approximately 25% of ARDS patients¹⁸) should be systematically searched for in this setting.

Finally, it is also important to remember that approximately 15% of patients with ARDS may also have a cardiac shunt from right to left through a patent foramen ovale¹⁹. An echocardiogram with a bubble study should thus be obtained whenever a low $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$ ratio cannot be clearly explained by the extent of the non-aerated alveolar process alone, a low-mixed venous O_2 saturation or circumstances known to be associated with impaired hypoxic vasoconstriction. Worsening gas exchange when PEEP is dialled up not only can be an important clue to the presence of a right to left shunt through a patent foramen ovale, but also can be seen in the presence of a decompensated cor pulmonale or hypovolemia. Those three possibilities are usually easy to differentiate from each other by a bedside echocardiogram.

Physicians and fractional inspired oxygen factors

Unintended physicians' contributions to the $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$ ratio are often under-appreciated. This is the consequence of variable practice and recommendation regarding which

PaO_2 to target in ARDS. In the ARDS net trials²⁰, the explicit targets were 55–80 mm Hg for the PaO_2 and 88–95 for the arterial O_2 saturation. Let us consider the implication of those targets in a patient with a 30% shunt. If one targets a PaO_2 of 60 mm Hg, the FIO_2 required to achieve that target would be 0.5 and the corresponding $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$ would be 120 (moderate ARDS). If one targets a PaO_2 of 80 mm Hg, the required FIO_2 would be 1 and the resulting $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$ would be 80 (severe ARDS). In other words, depending on the targeted PaO_2 , the apparent ARDS severity may change.

Finally, it is important to stress that varying the FIO_2 has different effects on the $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$ ratio depending on the degree of intrapulmonary shunt, arterio-venous differences, PaCO_2 , respiratory quotient and haemoglobin under conditions of constant metabolism and ventilation/perfusion abnormality²¹. For instance, increasing the FIO_2 causes the $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$ ratio to rise if intrapulmonary shunt is small, but to drop if the shunt is large (Figure 2, panel B).

Conclusion

As implied by the ARDS definition, the $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$ ratio should ideally closely reflect the degree of lung injury and extent of alveolar flooding/collapse. Although there is clearly an association between this ratio and ARDS severity at least when the definition is applied to a population, the reality at the bedside is more complex, particularly if this ratio is calculated without standardising the levels of FIO_2 (e.g., measurement at an FIO_2 of 1 avoid the problem of the variable impact of the FIO_2 on the ratio) and of PEEP, given that some patients are recruiters and others are not.

As discussed above, the $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FIO}_2$ ratio does not linearly track the degree of lung injury (severity) and may change for reasons that are completely independent of the lungs (e.g., a change in CO and mixed

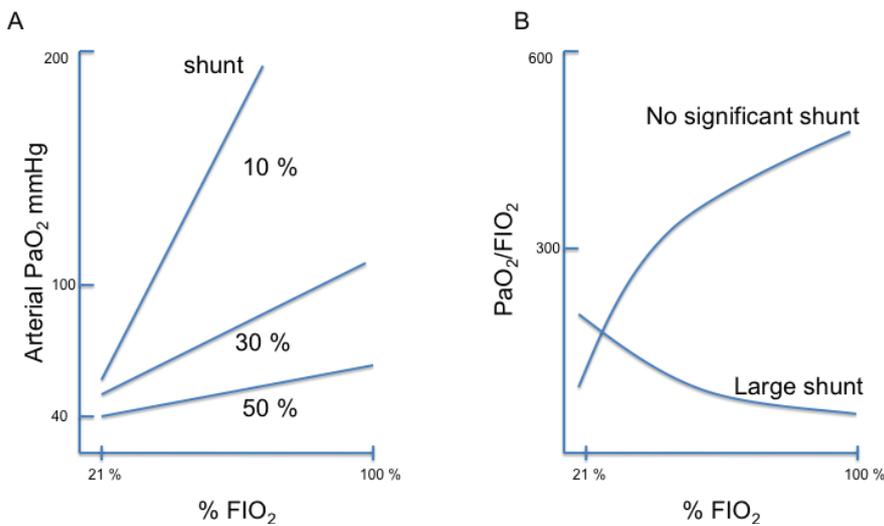


Figure 2: Relationships between PaO₂, FIO₂ and shunt.

Panel A shows the relationships between FIO₂ and PaO₂ for different degrees of shunts. Notice that increasing the FIO₂ has less and less effect on the PaO₂, as the degree of shunt increases.

Panel B shows that the relationship between FIO₂ and PaO₂/FIO₂ varies with the degree of shunt. This is explained by the relationship demonstrated in Panel A.

| Table 2 Clues to the underlying cause(s) for a change in the PaO ₂ /FIO ₂ ratio in a patient with ARDS. | | |
|--|---|--|
| Possible clues | Mechanisms | Examples |
| Change in respiratory system mechanics or X-ray | Change in alveolar units ventilation: V factors | Increased infiltrates, edema, atelectasis, pneumothorax |
| Vasoactive medication started or stopped or Presence of a condition affecting the hypoxic vasoconstriction or the regional distribution of perfusion and Unchanged X-ray, respiratory mechanic or hemodynamics | Change in the perfusion of ventilated and non aerated alveolar units: Q factors | IV Vasodilator started Change in position, acid-base status |
| Different providers caring for a patient | Different ventilator strategies | Change in FIO ₂ , PEEP, or Vt |
| Hypotension, cor pulmonale on echo, low cardiac output or mixed venous O ₂ saturation | Increased O ₂ extraction | Anemia, cor pulmonale |

ARDS, acute respiratory distress syndrome; IV, intravenous; PEEP, positive end expiratory pressure; Vt, tidal volume.

venous O₂). Simply turning up the FIO₂ or PEEP knob when PaO₂/FIO₂ decreases and assuming that in every

patient this ratio more or less linearly reflects ARDS severity is a potentially armful approach.

Interpreting this ratio at the bedside is not that simple and requires a good understanding of cardiopulmonary physiology, a sound clinical judgment and a thoughtful approach (see Table 2). A correct interpretation may require obtaining and/or reviewing the following data: 1. an arterial and venous blood gas to confirm the pulse oximetry reading and assess the venous O₂ saturation 2. recent ventilator setting changes particularly to PEEP, FIO₂ and tidal volume 3. the chest X-ray or computed tomography and respiratory mechanic measurements to assess the alveolar flooding or collapse and the size of the 'baby lung' (to look for unaccounted discrepancy between those parameters and the degree of shunt present) 4. a haemodynamic/ cardiac evaluation by performing a point-of-care ultrasound to assess for the presence of cor pulmonale and cardiac shunt 5. the conditions that have the potential to affect hypoxic vasoconstriction.

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Abbreviations list

ARDS, acute respiratory distress syndrome; PaO₂/FIO₂, pressure of arterial oxygen to fractional inspired oxygen concentration; PEEP, positive end expiratory pressure; V/Q, ventilation to perfusion.

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