Activity of an Intermediate Respiratory Care Unit Attached to a Respiratory Medicine Department

Ernest Sala,* Catalina Balaguer, Miguel Carrera, Alexandre Palou, Juana Bover, and Álvar Agustí

Servei de Pneumologia, Hospital Universitari Son Dureta, Fundació Caubet-Cimera, Palma de Mallorca, Islas Baleares, CIBER (Centro de Investigación Biomédica en Red) de Enfermedades Respiratorias (CibeRes), Spain

**Original Article**

**ABSTRACT**

*Background and objective:* With the development of noninvasive ventilation (NIV), patients with increasingly complex needs have been admitted to respiratory medicine departments. For this reason, such departments in Spain and throughout Europe have been adding specialized respiratory intermediate care units (RICUs) for monitoring and treating patients with severe respiratory diseases. The aim of the present study was to describe the activity of such a RICU. The description may be of use in facilitating the setting up of RICUs in other hospitals of the Spanish National Health Service.

**Methods:** A systematic record of activity carried out in the RICU of the Hospital Universitario Son Dureta between January and December 2006 was kept prospectively.

**Results:** Of 206 patients with a mean (SD) age of 65 (14) years admitted to the unit, 67% came from the emergency department, 14% from the respiratory medicine department, and 12% from the intensive care unit (ICU). The most common admission diagnoses were exacerbated chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) (n=97, 47.1%), pneumonia (n=39, 18.9%), heart failure (n=17, 8.2%), and pulmonary vascular diseases (n=18, 8.7%). One hundred twenty-one patients (59%) required NIV. Mean length of stay in the RICU was 5 (5) days. Patients were discharged to the conventional respiratory ward in 79.1% of the cases; 7.8% required subsequent admission to the ICU, and 9.7% died. Of the patients with exacerbated COPD (mean age, 66.5 [10] years; mean length of stay, 4.6 [4.5] days), 67% required NIV, 7.2% required subsequent admission to the ICU, and 8.2% died.

**Conclusions:** The creation of a RICU by a respiratory medicine department is viable in Spain. Such units make it possible to treat a large number of patients with a low rate of therapeutic failures. Exacerbated COPD was the most common diagnosis on admission to our RICU, and the need for NIV was the most common criterion for admission.

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**Actividad de una unidad de cuidados respiratorios intermedios dependiente de un servicio de neumología**

**RESUMEN**

*Introducción:* El desarrollo de la ventilación no invasiva (VNI) ha aumentado la complejidad de los pacientes ingresados en los servicios de neumología. Por ello, en España y Europa se están incorporando unidades especiales para el seguimiento y tratamiento de pacientes con enfermedades respiratorias graves: las unidades de cuidados respiratorios intermedios (UCRI). El objetivo del presente estudio ha sido describir la actividad de una UCRI dependiente de un servicio de neumología. Esta información puede ser un punto de...
Introduction

With few exceptions, a typical respiratory medicine department in Spain does not include specific units for the treatment of critical respiratory patients. The ongoing development of noninvasive ventilation (NIV), however, has allowed pulmonologists to manage more complex patients, and this in turn has generated needs that had previously been limited to the critical care setting. For this reason, respiratory medicine departments in Spain and many other European countries are beginning to add specialized respiratory intermediate care units (RICUs) for the monitoring and treatment of patients with severe respiratory diseases. The RICU was recently defined by a working group of the Spanish Society of Pulmonary and Thoracic Surgery (SEPAR) as an area for monitoring and treating patients with acute or exacerbated chronic respiratory failure caused primarily by a respiratory disease. The main argument in favor of such units is based on the observation that many patients admitted to intensive care units (ICUs) do not require invasive ventilation; yet the management of these patients is still too complex for adequate care to be provided on a conventional ward.\(^2\)\(^5\)

Nevertheless, in 2002 there were only 42 RICUs in all of Europe, and of these only 1 belonged to the Spanish National Health Service.\(^6\)

Despite the theoretical bases for their creation, then, such units have not become widespread. To the best of our knowledge, no studies have been published describing the characteristics and experience of any Spanish RICU. The aim of this study was to describe the activity of the RICU attached to the respiratory medicine department of the Hospital Universitario Son Dureta in Palma de Mallorca, Spain. This description may be of use in facilitating the setting up of RICUs in other hospitals of the Spanish National Health Service.

Methods

Setting

The Hospital Universitario Son Dureta belongs to the Balearic Islands Health Service (Ib-Salut) and is the referral hospital for a population of 955,045 people who live on the islands (data from January 1, 2004; source: www.ine.es). It has 910 beds, 24 of which are permanently allocated to the respiratory medicine department. Of these 24 beds, 20 are on the conventional ward and 4 in the RICU.

The RICU of the hospital’s respiratory medicine department was inaugurated in December 2005. It is located on the respiratory floor and contains 4 beds with no partitions between them. Each bed has its own cardiorespiratory monitor for the continuous noninvasive recording of heart rate, respiratory frequency, and arterial oxygen saturation, as well as for monitoring arterial pressure if necessary. The unit is also equipped with 4 respirators for NIV, 3 positive pressure devices, and 1 volumetric device.

The RICU also has its own nursing station staffed by 1 nurse and 1 nursing assistant per shift (workdays and weekends/holidays) who belong to the respiratory medicine department’s staff. The nurse-to-patient ratio is 1:4. A physiotherapist, who is not part of the RICU staff, becomes involved only if the physician in charge of the unit requests one from the rehabilitation department. The physician in charge is a pulmonologist who belongs to the respiratory medicine department and works exclusively in the RICU. Medical supervision during evenings, nights, weekends, and holidays is the responsibility of the pulmonologist on duty. Criteria for admission to the Hospital Universitario Son Dureta’s RICU are shown in Table 1.
Study Design

This was a prospective observational study. A systematic record of the activity carried out in the RICU between January and December 2006 was kept prospectively. The following variables were obtained: total number of admissions; age, sex, and admission source for each patient; main admission diagnoses; arterial blood gas values on admission; need for NIV; length of stay in the RICU; discharge destination; and number of treatment failures (ie, the number of patients who either required transfer to the ICU or died in the unit). Results are presented as means (SD) or absolute values and percentage of total.

Results

During the study period, 1494 patients were admitted to our respiratory medicine department. Of these, 206 (13.8% of the total; mean age, 65 [14] years) were admitted to the RICU (Table 2). Sixty-seven percent (n=138) came from the emergency department, 14% (n=29) from the respiratory ward, and 12% (n=25) from the ICU. The most common admission diagnosis was exacerbated chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) (n=97, 47.1%), followed by pneumonia (n=39, 18.9%), and heart failure (n=17, 8.2%); 18 patients had pulmonary vascular diseases (pulmonary thromboembolism, 10 [4.8%]; pulmonary arterial hypertension, 8 [3.9%]). One hundred twenty-one patients (59%) were admitted because they required NIV on admission due to progressive worsening (arterial blood gas values on admission of these patients to the RICU: pH, 7.23 [0.07]; PaO2, 52.4 [19.15] mm Hg; PaCO2, 70.62 [13.59] mm Hg) and the mean length of stay in the RICU was 4.6 [4.5] days. While most (80.4%) were discharged to the conventional respiratory ward in 79.1% of the cases, 7.8% needed to be admitted to the ICU—these were mainly patients with exacerbated COPD (n=8) or severe pneumonia (n=7). Of the 20 patients who died, 18 were admitted with a do-not-resuscitate/do-not-intubate order, and with NIV as the only ventilatory support option.

Given that exacerbated COPD was the most common diagnosis on admission to the RICU, it is worth looking at the data on this disease in greater detail. During 2006, 631 patients were admitted to the Hospital Universitario Son Dureta with a diagnosis of exacerbated COPD; 466 (74%) of them were admitted to the respiratory medicine department. Of these 466 patients, 20.8% (n=97); mean age, 66.5 [10.2] years) were admitted to the RICU (Table 3). Sixty-seven percent (n=65) of these patients required NIV (arterial blood gas values on admission of the ICU patients: pH, 7.25 [0.09]; PaO2, 52.4 [19.15] mm Hg; PaCO2, 70.62 [13.59] mm Hg) and the mean length of stay in the ICU was 4.6 [4.5] days. While most (80.4%) were discharged to the respiratory medicine department, 7.2% (n=7) required ICU admission due to progressive worsening (arterial blood gas values on admission of these patients to the RICU: pH, 7.23 [0.07]; PaO2, 62.96 [42.37] mm Hg; PaCO2, 80.35 [9.67] mm Hg and 8.2% (n=8) died. Of the 8 patients who died, 7 had been admitted with a do-not-resuscitate/do-not-intubate order and with NIV as the only ventilatory support option.

Discussion

Our findings showed that a) the creation of a RICU by a respiratory medicine department is viable in Spain, b) RICUs make it possible to treat a large number of patients with a low rate of therapeutic failures, c) exacerbated COPD was the main admission diagnosis, and d) the need for NIV was the most frequent reason for admission to the RICU.
It has been shown that as many as 40% of patients in medical ICUs and 30% of those in surgical ICUs are admitted only for continuous monitoring and not for specific therapeutic interventions. It has also been observed that it is possible to reduce costs and improve the use of general ICUs by using RICUs for transferring patients from the ICU or for admitting patients needing an intermediate level of critical care from emergency departments. Furthermore, RICUs make it possible to improve monitoring and provide a higher nurse-to-patient ratio than is found on a conventional hospital ward, and thus can help prevent situations of insufficient care for patients with severe disease who are not admitted to a general ICU.

SEPAR guidelines state that the objectives of a RICU should be: 1) cardiopulmonary monitoring and/or NIV treatment for respiratory failure; 2) continuous monitoring of patients following thoracic surgery or tracheostomy; and 3) the treatment of critically ill patients whose weaning from invasive ventilation is difficult. However, no guidelines on how to organize RICUs have been established, as they need to be adapted to the specific needs and characteristics of each hospital. Three models have been proposed: a) the independent model (independent of both the respiratory medicine department and the ICU), b) the parallel model (RICU adjacent to the ICU), and c) the integrated model (integrated into the ICU or the respiratory ward). Each model has advantages and disadvantages, but to date there have been no studies comparing them. The choice of the most appropriate model, therefore, will be determined by the capabilities of each hospital. The RICU we describe is integrated into our hospital’s respiratory medicine department. This allows for continuity of patient care within a single department and facilitates transfers between the hospital ward and the RICU in accordance with changes in patients’ clinical situations. A RICU also allows for greater flexibility, integration, and the ongoing training of the respiratory medicine department’s medical, nursing, and physical therapy staff.

The main justification for these units is the need to apply NIV for which the most common indication is the treatment of acute respiratory failure or chronic exacerbated COPD. A study carried out in the United Kingdom showed that around 20% of patients hospitalized for exacerbated COPD presented respiratory acidosis and that 80% of these (72 patients/250,000 inhabitants) could benefit from NIV. In exacerbated COPD, it is generally recommended that NIV be administered in appropriate settings, mainly in ICUs. In patients with less severe disease (arterial pH on admission between 7.30 and 7.35), however, NIV can also be administered on the hospital ward, although this increases the care burden for the nursing staff. A recent guideline points out that with appropriate monitoring, patients with an arterial pH between 7.25 and 7.30 who do not require immediate orotracheal intubation can be cared for in RICUs, while patients with a pH less than 7.25 should be admitted to the ICU. To date, however, no comparative studies have been published demonstrating that ICUs are a better setting than RICUs for treating patients with such pH values. In the present study, patients with exacerbated COPD and a mean pH less than 7.26 were treated satisfactorily, although the subgroup of patients (approximately 7.2% of those with exacerbated COPD receiving NIV) with more severe respiratory acidosis upon admission to the RICU (mean pH, <7.24) required invasive ventilation and ICU admission. These results indicate that patients with exacerbated COPD and mean pH values less than 7.26 can be treated in a RICU within a respiratory medicine department with a failure rate similar to that observed in other studies carried out in an ICU. Nevertheless, these data do not come from a randomized study, and can therefore not be generalized.

The patients in this study who derived the greatest benefit from the RICU were those with exacerbated COPD. However, 52.9% (n=109) were admitted to the RICU with other diagnoses. RICUs may thus also be appropriate for the treatment of patients with other diseases: a) diseases other than COPD in which NIV is indicated (acute respiratory failure, mainly in immunocompromised patients with pneumonia, and patients with acute cardiogenic pulmonary edema) or acute exacerbations of chronic respiratory failure (especially restrictive diseases), and b) severe diseases that require continuous monitoring, but not NIV (severe pneumonia, acute asthma, life-threatening hemoptysis, pulmonary embolism, etc.). A recent study showed that as many as 21.5% of patients were admitted to RICUs and high dependency units in Europe with a do-not-resuscitate/do-not-intubate order and with NIV as the only ventilatory support option. Unlike ICUs, then, RICUs make it possible to admit patients with severe disease who require monitoring and NIV, but in whom neither invasive ventilation nor advanced life support measures are to be used. In our study, 18 (90%) of the 20 (9.7%) patients who died had been admitted with a do-not-resuscitate/do-not-intubate order and with NIV as the only ventilatory support option.

The present study has certain limitations to mention: a) it was an observational study and we thus could not establish causal relationships between the variables, b) we did not compare the results obtained in the RICU with those of a conventional hospital ward or ICU, and c) the admission criteria described in Table 1 were not strictly adhered to during the months when health care demand in the hospital was greatest. During these months some patients who did not meet the strict admission criteria were admitted to the RICU in order to help relieve emergency department overcrowding. In some hospitals, then, transferring patients out of the emergency department has priority over adherence to criteria for admission to some units. In such circumstances, the normal activity of a RICU may be modified, if only slightly.

In summary, our description of the activity of a RICU attached to a respiratory medicine department can be of use in stimulating the creation of other such units in hospitals of the Spanish National Health Care Service.

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