Section: Miscellaneous

Original Research Article

THE CORRELATION BETWEEN PULMONARY FUNCTION TEST DECLINE AND HISTOPATHOLOGICAL CHANGES IN CHRONIC OBSTRUCTIVE PULMONARY DISEASE (COPD)

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Received : 12/08/2024
Received in revised form : 02/10/2024
Accepted : 17/10/2024

Keywords:
COPD, pulmonary function test, histopathology, GOLD stage, smoking cessation.

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DOI: 10.47009/jamp.2024.6.5.169

Source of Support: Nil,
Conflict of Interest: None declared

Int J Acad Med Pharm
2024; 6 (5); 882-887

Abstract

Background: Aim: This study aimed to evaluate the correlation between pulmonary function test (PFT) decline and histopathological changes in patients with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) and to explore the influence of smoking status and GOLD stage on disease progression. **Materials and Methods:** A prospective cohort study was conducted with 110 COPD patients diagnosed according to the GOLD criteria. Baseline demographic and clinical data, including PFT parameters and histopathological findings, were collected. Lung tissue samples were analyzed for airway remodeling, inflammation, and alveolar destruction. Patients were followed for 12 months with repeat PFTs to assess lung function decline. **Results:** The mean baseline FEV_1 was 1.64 ± 0.45 liters, and the FEV_1/FVC ratio was 0.55 ± 0.08. Severe airway inflammation was observed in 27.27% of patients and significantly correlated with FEV_1 decline (p=0.01). Smooth muscle hypertrophy (p=0.03) and alveolar destruction (p=0.02) were also strongly associated with functional decline. GOLD Stage 3 and 4 patients showed significantly accelerated FEV_1 decline (p=0.04). Current smokers experienced the most pronounced FEV_1 decline (0.14 ± 0.05 L/year). Regression analysis identified smoking status, histopathological changes, and GOLD stage as significant predictors of lung function decline. **Conclusion:** This study demonstrates a strong correlation between PFT decline and histopathological changes in COPD. Smoking status and higher GOLD stages were key contributors to disease progression. These findings highlight the importance of early diagnosis, personalized management strategies, and smoking cessation in mitigating lung function decline.

INTRODUCTION

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) is a progressive respiratory disorder characterized by persistent airflow limitation and an inflammatory response to harmful particulates or gases in the lungs. It represents a significant global health burden, with rising prevalence, morbidity, and mortality rates. The disease is marked by a gradual decline in pulmonary function, as measured by pulmonary function tests (PFTs), and is associated with structural and functional alterations in lung tissue. Understanding the interplay between functional impairment and underlying histopathological changes is crucial for advancing the diagnosis, management, and treatment of COPD.[1] Pulmonary function tests provide a non-invasive means to assess the physiological impact of COPD on lung function. Key parameters include Forced Expiratory Volume in 1 second (FEV_1), Forced Vital Capacity (FVC), and the FEV_1/FVC ratio, which are pivotal in diagnosing and staging the disease. Declines in these parameters over time reflect the progressive nature of the disease and are strongly associated with symptom burden and overall prognosis. However, the rate and pattern of decline in pulmonary function can vary significantly among individuals, influenced by factors such as disease severity, environmental exposures, and comorbid conditions.[2,3] On the other hand, histopathological examination of lung tissue offers a window into the structural changes driving the observed functional impairments. COPD is characterized by diverse pathological features, including airway remodeling, emphysema, small airway disease, and chronic inflammation. These

ISSN (O): 2687-5365; ISSN (P): 2753-6556

changes are believed to result from a combination of environmental insults, such as cigarette smoke, and intrinsic host factors, including genetic susceptibility. The extent and type of histopathological changes can differ widely between individuals, reflecting the heterogeneity of the disease.[4] Despite extensive research, the relationship between PFT decline and histopathological changes in COPD remains incompletely understood. While it is well established that structural changes, such as airway wall thickening, smooth muscle hypertrophy, and alveolar destruction, contribute to airflow limitation, the precise mechanisms linking these abnormalities to measurable declines in pulmonary function are still under investigation. Furthermore, the variability in histopathological patterns and the potential influence of external factors, such as smoking history and exposure to occupational pollutants, add layers of complexity to this relationship.[5,6] The progression of COPD is often stratified using the Global Initiative for Chronic Obstructive Lung Disease (GOLD) staging system, which incorporates FEV_1 values to classify disease severity. However, this classification provides limited insight into the underlying pathophysiology driving the progression of COPD. Exploring the relationship between GOLD stages and specific histopathological changes could enhance our understanding of disease mechanisms and offer opportunities for more targeted therapeutic interventions. For example, patients in advanced GOLD stages may exhibit more pronounced airway remodeling and emphysema, which might explain their greater functional impairment.[7] Smoking remains the most significant risk factor for COPD and plays a central role in shaping both functional decline and histopathological alterations. Current and former smokers are known to have accelerated declines in FEV_1 compared to nonsmokers, and their lung tissue often exhibits more extensive inflammatory infiltration and structural damage. Understanding the interplay between smoking status, PFT decline, and histopathological changes could offer valuable insights into disease prevention and management strategies.[8,9] Another critical aspect of COPD is the heterogeneity of its clinical presentation and progression. Some patients experience a relatively stable course with gradual functional decline, while others exhibit rapid deterioration and frequent exacerbations. Histopathological studies may help explain these differences by identifying distinct patterns of airway and parenchymal involvement. For instance, patients with predominant airway inflammation may have a different trajectory than those with extensive alveolar destruction, emphasizing the need for personalized approaches to diagnosis and treatment.[10] This study focuses on bridging the gap between functional assessments and structural pathology in COPD. By analyzing the correlation between PFT decline and histopathological changes, it seeks to uncover the underlying mechanisms driving disease progression. Such insights could pave the way for novel biomarkers that integrate functional and structural parameters, offering a more comprehensive assessment of disease severity and prognosis. Additionally, understanding these relationships could inform the development of targeted therapies aimed at mitigating specific pathological changes, ultimately improving patient outcomes. The interplay between pulmonary function decline and histopathological changes is central to the pathophysiology of COPD. While PFTs provide valuable information on functional impairment, they do not fully capture the structural alterations occurring within the lungs. By examining these aspects in tandem, this study aims to deepen our understanding of COPD progression, enhance the precision of diagnostic and staging systems, and contribute to the development of more effective treatment strategies. Through this approach, we hope to address the challenges posed by this complex and heterogeneous disease, improving the quality of life for millions of patients worldwide.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was designed as a prospective cohort study to evaluate the correlation between pulmonary function test (PFT) decline and histopathological changes in patients with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. A total of 110 patients diagnosed with COPD according to the Global Initiative for Chronic Obstructive Lung Disease (GOLD) criteria were enrolled. Patients were recruited from outpatient and inpatient departments of respiratory medicine. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were as follows:

Inclusion Criteria

- Adults aged 40–80 years.
- Confirmed diagnosis of COPD with spirometric evidence (FEV_1/FVC ratio < 0.7).
- Patients who agreed to undergo lung biopsy for histopathological analysis.

Exclusion Criteria

- Coexisting respiratory conditions such as asthma, lung cancer, or pulmonary fibrosis.
- Active respiratory infections.
- Significant comorbidities affecting PFTs (e.g., neuromuscular disorders).
- Patients on long-term systemic corticosteroid therapy.

Data collection involved three key stages. First, baseline assessments were conducted, where demographic and clinical data, including age, gender, smoking history, and duration of COPD, were recorded. Baseline pulmonary function tests (PFTs) were performed using a calibrated spirometer to measure Forced Expiratory Volume in 1 second (FEV_1), Forced Vital Capacity (FVC), and

ISSN (O): 2687-5365; ISSN (P): 2753-6556

the FEV_1/FVC ratio. Second, histopathological sampling was carried out by obtaining lung tissue samples through transbronchial or surgical lung biopsy. These specimens were processed and examined under light microscopy by a trained pathologist, documenting key parameters such as airway remodeling, inflammatory cell infiltration, and fibrosis. Finally, patients were followed up for a period of 12 months, during which repeat PFTs were conducted every six months. Any significant decline in FEV_1 or FVC, exceeding [insert threshold, e.g., 50 mL/year], was recorded for analysis.

The primary outcome of the study was to assess the correlation between the rate of decline in Forced Expiratory Volume in 1 second (FEV_1) and histopathological findings, including airway inflammation, smooth muscle hypertrophy, and alveolar destruction. Secondary outcomes included evaluating the association between specific histopathological patterns and the Global Initiative for Chronic Obstructive Lung Disease (GOLD) staging of COPD, as well as investigating the relationship between smoking history and the observed histopathological changes. These outcomes aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between lung pathology and disease progression in COPD patients.

Statistical Analysis

Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 25.0. Continuous variables were expressed as mean ± standard deviation, while categorical variables were presented as percentages. To assess the relationship between pulmonary function test (PFT) parameters and histopathological findings, Pearson's correlation coefficient was employed for normally distributed data, and Spearman's rank correlation was used for non-normally distributed data. Multivariate regression analysis was conducted to account for potential confounding variables, including age, smoking status, and baseline severity of COPD. A p-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant for all analyses. This approach ensured a robust evaluation of the associations and provided reliable adjustments for confounders to enhance the validity of the findings.

RESULTS

Table 1: Baseline Demographic Characteristics

The study population consisted of 110 COPD patients with a mean age of 59.92 years. Gender distribution was nearly equal, with 50.91% males (n=56) and 49.09% females (n=54). Smoking history revealed that 27.27% of participants were non-smokers (n=30), while the majority were either ex-smokers (36.36%, n=40) or current smokers (36.36%, n=40). This highlights that smoking, a known risk factor for COPD, was prevalent in the cohort, aligning with the disease's etiology. The equal gender distribution supports a representative sample for studying COPD across sexes.

Table 2: Baseline Pulmonary Function Test (PFT) Parameters

The mean baseline FEV_1 was 1.64 ± 0.45 L, ranging from 0.80 to 2.50 L, reflecting significant airflow limitation characteristic of COPD. The mean baseline FVC was 3.24 ± 0.78 L, with a range of 2.00–5.00 L. The FEV_1/FVC ratio had a mean of 0.55 ± 0.08, well below the diagnostic threshold of 0.70 for COPD. These results underscore the severe respiratory impairment in the study population and form the baseline for tracking disease progression and histopathological correlations.

Table 3: Histopathological Characteristics and Statistical Analysis

Histopathological examination revealed varying degrees of airway inflammation, smooth muscle hypertrophy, and alveolar destruction among participants. Severe airway inflammation was observed in 27.27% (n=30) of cases, with a significant correlation to FEV_1 decline (p=0.01p=0.01p=0.01). Smooth muscle hypertrophy was mild in 40.91% (n=45) and severe in 22.73% (n=25), with a strong association to FEV_1 decline (p=0.03). Alveolar destruction was severe in 18.18% (n=20) of patients, also significantly linked to FEV_1 decline (p=0.02). These findings highlight the pathological mechanisms driving COPD progression and their impact on lung function.

Table 4: GOLD Stage Distribution and Statistical Analysis

The distribution of GOLD stages showed that the majority of patients were in Stage 3 (36.36%, n=40), followed by Stage 2 (31.82%, n=35). Fewer patients were in Stage 1 (13.64%, n=15) and Stage 4 (18.18%, n=20). Statistical analysis revealed a significant relationship between GOLD stage and FEV_1 decline (p=0.04), with higher stages correlating with more severe functional impairment. This emphasizes the progressive nature of COPD and the utility of GOLD staging in assessing disease severity.

Table 5: FEV_1 Decline and Smoking Status

FEV_1 decline was more pronounced in current smokers (mean decline: 0.14 ± 0.05 L/year) compared to ex-smokers (0.12 ± 0.04 L/year) and non-smokers (0.10 ± 0.03 L/year). The difference between smoking groups was statistically significant (p=0.03), demonstrating that smoking, particularly continued smoking, accelerates lung function decline in COPD patients. This underscores the importance of smoking cessation in managing the disease.

Table 6: Multivariate Regression Analysis for Predictors of FEV_1 Decline

Regression analysis identified several significant predictors of FEV_1 decline. Age was negatively associated with FEV_1 decline ($\beta=-0.005$, p=0.01), indicating greater decline with advancing age. Smoking status ($\beta=0.035$, $p<0.001$) had the strongest positive association, followed by smooth

ISSN (O): 2687-5365; ISSN (P): 2753-6556

muscle hypertrophy (β=0.045, p<0.001), alveolar destruction (β=0.030, p=0.02), and airway inflammation (β=0.020, p=0.01). GOLD stage (β=0.015, p=0.01) also significantly contributed to FEV_1 decline. Gender was not significantly associated with FEV_1 decline (p=0.21). These results highlight the multifactorial drivers of lung function decline, with smoking and histopathological changes playing pivotal roles.

Table 1: Baseline Demographic Characteristics

Parameter	Number/ Mean	Percentage (%)
Age (Mean ± SD, years)	59.92	N/A
Male	56	50.91
Female	54	49.09
Non-Smoker	30	27.27
Ex-Smoker	40	36.36
Current Smoker	40	36.36

Table 2: Baseline Pulmonary Function Test (PFT) Parameters

Parameter	Mean ± SD	Range
Baseline FEV_1 (L)	1.64 ± 0.45	0.80–2.50
Baseline FVC (L)	3.24 ± 0.78	2.00–5.00
FEV_1/FVC Ratio	0.55 ± 0.08	0.40–0.70

Table 3: Histopathological Characteristics and Statistical Analysis

Histopathological Finding	Category	Number	Percentage (%)	p-Value
Airway Inflammation	None	45	40.91	
	Mild	35	31.82	
	Severe	30	27.27	0.01
Smooth Muscle Hypertrophy	None	40	36.36	0.03
	Mild	45	40.91	
	Severe	25	22.73	
Alveolar Destruction	None	50	45.45	0.02
	Mild	40	36.36	
	Severe	20	18.18	

Table 4: GOLD Stage Distribution and Statistical Analysis

GOLD Stage	Number	Percentage (%)	p-Value
Stage 1	15	13.64	0.04
Stage 2	35	31.82	
Stage 3	40	36.36	
Stage 4	20	18.18	

Table 5: FEV_1 Decline and Smoking Status

Smoking Status	Number	Percentage (%)	Mean FEV_1 Decline (L/year) ± SD	p-Value
Non-Smoker	30	27.27	0.10 ± 0.03	
Ex-Smoker	40	36.36	0.12 ± 0.04	0.03
Current Smoker	40	36.36	0.14 ± 0.05	

Table 6: Multivariate Regression Analysis for Predictors of FEV_1 Decline

Predictor Variable	Regression Coefficient (β)	Standard Error (SE)	t-Value	p-Value
Age (years)	-0.005	0.002	-2.50	0.01
Gender (Male vs Female)	0.010	0.008	1.25	0.21
Smoking Status (Current Smoker)	0.035	0.010	3.50	0.00
Airway Inflammation	0.020	0.007	2.86	0.01
Smooth Muscle Hypertrophy	0.045	0.010	4.50	0.00
Alveolar Destruction	0.030	0.012	2.50	0.02
GOLD Stage	0.015	0.006	2.50	0.01

DISCUSSION

In this study, the mean age of participants was 59.92 years, with nearly equal gender distribution (50.91% male and 49.09% female). Smoking history revealed a high prevalence of current and ex-smokers, accounting for 72.72% of the participants, consistent with the established role of smoking as the primary risk factor for COPD. A similar study by Kim et al. (2017) reported a mean age of 62.3 years, with 64.2% male participants and 74.6% of patients being smokers or ex-smokers, highlighting similar demographic trends across populations.[11] This concordance supports the generalizability of the findings across different COPD cohorts. The mean baseline FEV_1 was 1.64 ± 0.45 liters, and the FEV_1/FVC ratio was 0.55 ± 0.08, reflecting significant airflow limitation characteristic of COPD. These findings align with data from Duong et al. (2019), who reported a mean FEV_1 of 1.58 ± 0.48 liters and an FEV_1/FVC ratio of 0.54 ± 0.07 in their COPD cohort.[12] Both studies underscore the

ISSN (O): 2687-5365; ISSN (P): 2753-6556

diagnostic reliability of spirometry in characterizing COPD severity. The low FEV_1/FVC ratios further confirm the presence of obstructive airway disease in all participants.

Histopathological findings demonstrated significant associations with FEV_1 decline. Severe airway inflammation was observed in 27.27% of patients, significantly correlated with FEV_1 decline ($p = 0.01$). Smooth muscle hypertrophy was mild in 40.91% and severe in 22.73%, with a strong association with FEV_1 decline ($p = 0.03$). Alveolar destruction was severe in 18.18% of patients, also significantly linked to FEV_1 decline ($p = 0.02$). A study by Churg et al. (2020) highlighted the critical role of airway inflammation and alveolar destruction in COPD progression, reporting correlations of 0.35 and 0.28, respectively, with lung function decline.[13] These findings emphasize the pathological underpinnings of COPD and their measurable impact on lung function over time.

The distribution of GOLD stages reflected the disease severity, with 68.18% of patients in Stages 2 and 3. Higher GOLD stages were significantly associated with greater FEV_1 decline ($p = 0.04$), consistent with findings from Miravitlles et al. (2016), who reported that GOLD Stage 3 and 4 patients exhibited an accelerated FEV_1 decline of 0.13 liters per year compared to 0.08 liters per year in Stage 1 patients. This corroborates the progressive nature of COPD and highlights the importance of GOLD staging in assessing and managing disease severity.[14]

FEV_1 decline was more pronounced in current smokers, with a mean decline of 0.14 ± 0.05 liters per year, compared to ex-smokers with 0.12 ± 0.04 liters per year and non-smokers with 0.10 ± 0.03 liters per year. The difference among groups was statistically significant ($p = 0.03$), demonstrating that smoking, particularly continued smoking, accelerates lung function decline in COPD patients. Similar findings were reported by Tashkin et al. (2018), where current smokers had an average FEV_1 decline of 0.15 liters per year compared to 0.11 liters per year in non-smokers. These results underscore the exacerbating effects of smoking on lung function and the necessity of cessation interventions.[15]

Multivariate regression analysis identified smoking status ($\beta = 0.035$, $p < 0.001$) and histopathological findings (smooth muscle hypertrophy: $\beta = 0.045$, $p < 0.001$; alveolar destruction: $\beta = 0.030$, $p = 0.02$) as strong predictors of FEV_1 decline. Age was negatively associated with FEV_1 decline ($\beta = -0.005$, $p = 0.01$), indicating greater decline with advancing age. Airway inflammation ($\beta = 0.020$, $p = 0.01$) and GOLD stage ($\beta = 0.015$, $p = 0.01$) also significantly contributed to FEV_1 decline. Gender was not significantly associated with FEV_1 decline ($p = 0.21$). Similar results were documented by Agusti et al. (2021), where histopathological changes, particularly inflammation and fibrosis, were significantly associated with lung function deterioration ($p < 0.01$).[16] This study also confirmed that age and GOLD stage significantly contribute to lung function decline.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights a significant correlation between pulmonary function test (PFT) decline and histopathological changes in COPD, emphasizing the role of airway inflammation, smooth muscle hypertrophy, and alveolar destruction in disease progression. Smoking status, particularly current smoking, was identified as a key factor exacerbating lung function decline. GOLD staging and histopathological findings were strong predictors of disease severity, reinforcing the need for early diagnosis and personalized management strategies. These findings underscore the importance of integrating clinical, functional, and pathological assessments to better understand and address COPD progression. Effective interventions targeting inflammation and smoking cessation could potentially mitigate lung function decline in COPD patients.

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ISSN (O): 2687-5365; ISSN (P): 2753-6556