Letter the editor: serious methodological concerns about a recently published meta-analysis on oxygen therapy

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Abstract

In a recent paper, Chen et al. report the findings of a systematic review with meta-analysis concerning conservative versus conventional oxygen therapy for critically ill patients. We wish to commend the authors for their interest in the matter. However, the authors appear to misquote findings, fail to report results for all specified analyses, do not identify all relevant trials, have post hoc changed the eligibility criteria, and have seemingly switched directions of effects in analyses of secondary outcomes. These issues have led to incorrect conclusions concerning the effects of targeted oxygen therapy in critically ill patients.

Keywords: Oxygen, Critical care, Systematic review, Meta-analysis

To the editor,

We have with interest read the systematic review with meta-analysis concerning the effects of conservative versus conventional oxygen therapy for critically ill patients by Chen et al. [1]. However, we have several concerns relating to the methodology and findings. None of the analyses and figures presented in this letter have been published elsewhere. They were specifically constructed for the purpose of this letter.

In the paper by Chen et al. [1], the mortality rates are erroneously quoted from several trials in the meta-analysis of mortality at longest follow-up. In the paper by Schjørring et al. [2], a mortality of 514/1447 and 529/1441 in the higher and lower group is incorrectly quoted. The

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¹ Department of Anaesthesia and Intensive Care, Aalborg University Hospital, Aalborg, Denmark tion for Girardis et al. is quoted although hospital mortality for the intention-to-treat cohort is reported in the trial paper [5]. A revised meta-analysis is presented in Fig. 1. Chen et al. reported the RR as 1.01 (95% CI 0.94–1.09), so there is a slight difference in the 95% CI [1]. The literature search is insufficient as the authors fail to identify four relevant papers focusing on: ICU-patients with acute exacerbation of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease [6]; oxygen therapy after cardiac-arrest [7]; normobaric oxygen in stroke patients [8]; and hyper-

correct mortality was 613/1447 and 618/1441, respec-

tively [2]. Mortality in the liberal group in the study by Barrot et al. was 31/102 [3], not 39/102 as stated. Twenty-

eight-day mortality for Asfar et al. is quoted despite

90-day mortality is reported in the trial paper [4]. The

ICU-mortality in the modified intention-to-treat popula-

normobaric oxygen in stroke patients [8]; and hyperoxaemia in stroke patients [9]. The first paper should have been identified and included in the meta-analysis, whilst the latter three should have been identified and excluded as per their stated exclusion criteria [1]. In their PRISMA-diagram, the authors state that six trials

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	High	ner	Low	er		Risk ratio	Risk ratio	
Study or Subgroup	Events	Total	Events	Total	Weight	M-H, Fixed, 95% Cl	M-H, Fixed, 95% Cl	
Asfar 2017	104	217	90	217	8.7%	1.16 [0.94 , 1.43]	-	
Barrot 2020	31	102	44	99	4.3%	0.68 [0.47 , 0.99]		
Girardis 2016	80	243	58	235	5.7%	1.33 [1.00 , 1.78]	-	
Gomersall 2002	0	17	1	17	0.1%	0.33 [0.01 , 7.65]		
Mackle 2020	164	475	170	476	16.4%	0.97 [0.81 , 1.15]	+	
Panwar 2016	19	51	21	52	2.0%	0.92 [0.57 , 1.50]		
Schjørring 2021	613	1447	618	1441	60.0%	0.99 [0.91 , 1.08]	•	
Yang 2019	37	114	26	100	2.7%	1.25 [0.82 , 1.91]	T	
Total (95% CI)		2666		2637	100.0%	1.01 [0.95 , 1.08]		
Total events:	1048		1028					
Heterogeneity: Chi ² =	11.62, df =	7 (P = 0.	11); l ² = 40)%			0.01 0.1 1 10 100	
Test for overall effect:	Z = 0.30 (F	P = 0.76)					Favours Higher Favours Lower	
Test for subgroup diffe	erences: No	ot applica	ble					
Fig. 1 Meta-analysis of mortality at the longest follow-up. M-H, Fixed denotes Mantel–Haenszel (M-H) fixed-effect model, CI confidence interval								

were excluded after full-text review and present the trials along with reasons for exclusions (Additional file 3: Table S1). In the main text and in this table only five trials are quoted. Moreover, the eligibility criteria have been changed post hoc, without justification, now excluding trials with patients at risk of ischaemia or hypoxic encephalopathy. No such criteria are mentioned in the protocol [10].

The authors' choice of subgroup analysis based on baseline ratios of partial pressure of oxygen to fraction of inspired oxygen (PaO₂/FiO₂) as according to mild, moderate, and severe acute respiratory distress syndrome (>200 mmHg, 100-200 mmHg, and <100 mmHg, respectively) is problematic, as the results from this analysis, specified in the statistical analysis section, are not presented, except for the results from the sensitivity analysis of trials excluding patients with a PaO₂/FiO₂ ratio < 100 mmHg (in the abstract). In the main text and their Fig. 2, the authors pool three trials all excluding patients with baseline PaO₂/FiO₂ ratios < 100 mmHg [4, 11] or < 150 mmHg [5]. This selection is inappropriate, as the approximate mean ratios in Mackle et al. were 252 mmHg [12], and in Panwar et al. 247 mmHg [13]. Though both trials did not restrict inclusion based on PaO₂/FiO₂ ratios, most patients included in these two trials clearly satisfy the criteria for inclusion in the subgroup analysis above. As no baseline PaO₂/FiO₂ ratios were presented by Girardis et al. [5], no knowledge of severity of respiratory failure can be ascertained. Therefore, this study should be excluded from the subgroup analysis. In the HOT-ICU trial [2], inclusion was not restricted by PaO₂/FiO₂ ratio, and the median baseline PaO₂/FiO₂ ratios were approximately 118 mmHg in both groups. However, a substantial proportion of patients had a ratio \geq 150 mmHg. We acknowledge that cohortlevel-based separations may seem to provide easy new knowledge when performing a meta-analysis, but with such heterogenous groups of included patients in each trial, the only reliable answer to risks according to baseline degree of respiratory failure would come from individual-based-separations and access to all trials' datasets. Below is provided a revised meta-analysis on mortality at longest follow-up stratified on the specified separation of trials (Fig. 2). This clearly changes the conclusion of the subgroup analysis, as the subgroup of trials with reported baseline PaO_2/FiO_2 ratios > 200 mmHg now produces a statistically non-significant result (and non-significant test for subgroup differences), contrary to the results presented by the authors.

Lastly, it appears that the two compared groups have been switched when reporting serious adverse events, despite correct findings are provided in the supplement (Additional file 6) [1]. If inversed, the results are in line with the meta-analysis provided below (Figs. 3, 4, 5). Conclusions based on these analyses now point in the opposite direction as to what was reported by authors, though still statistically insignificant.

Meta-analyses of high-quality trials are considered the highest level of evidence. Thus, the methodology applied needs to be of similar high quality. If not, inappropriate conclusions may be drawn, potentially misguiding clinical practice. In their review and metaanalysis, Chen et al. fail in several crucial domains, thereby presenting incorrect results and conclusions.

	Higher		Lower			Risk ratio	Risk ratio	
Study or Subgroup	Events	Total	Events	Total	Weight	M-H, Fixed, 95% CI	M-H, Fixed, 95% CI	
PaO _o /FiO _o ratio <100) mmHg							
Subtotal (95% CI)	-					Not estimable		
PaO _o /FiO _o ratio 100-	200 mmHg	I						
✓ Barrot 2020	31	102	44	99	4.6%	0.68 [0.47 , 0.99]		
✓ Schjørring 2021	613	1447	618	1441	63.7%	0.99 [0.91 , 1.08]	_	
Subtotal (95% CI)		1549		1540	68.3%	0.97 [0.89 , 1.05]	T	
Total events:	644		662					
Heterogeneity: Chi ² =	3.66, df = '	1 (P = 0.0	6); l² = 73°	%				
Test for overall effect:	Z = 0.79 (F	P = 0.43)						
PaO ₂ /FiO ₂ ratio >200) mmHg							
✓ Asfar 2017	104	217	90	217	9.3%	1.16 [0.94 , 1.43]	+	
✓ Mackle 2020	164	475	170	476	17.5%	0.97 [0.81 , 1.15]	+	
✓ Panwar 2016	19	51	21	52	2.1%	0.92 [0.57 , 1.50]	-	
✓ Yang 2019	37	114	26	100	2.8%	1.25 [0.82 , 1.91]		
Subtotal (95% CI)		857		845	31.7%	1.04 [0.92 , 1.18]	•	
Total events:	324		307					
Heterogeneity: Chi ² =	2.59, df = 3	3 (P = 0.4	6); l ² = 0%					
Test for overall effect:	Z = 0.69 (F	P = 0.49)						
Total (95% CI)		2406		2385	100.0%	0.99 [0.93 , 1.06]		
Total events:	968		969					
Heterogeneity: Chi2 =	7.28, df = 5	5 (P = 0.2	0); l ² = 31 ⁰	%				
Test for overall effect:	Z = 0.24 (F	P = 0.81)					Favours Higher Favours Lower	
Test for subgroup diffe	erences: Ch	ni² = 1.02	, df = 1 (P =	= 0.31), l ^a	² = 1.8%		-	
Fig. 2 Meta-analysis of	mortality at 1	the longes	it follow-up,	separatin	g trials as a	according to reported ba	seline PaO_2/FiO_2 ratios. M-H, Fixed denotes	
Mantel–Haenszel fixed-e	effect model	, CI confide	ence interva	ıl				

	High	ner	Low	ver		Risk ratio	Risk ratio		
Study or Subgroup	Events	Total	Events	Total	Weight	M-H, Fixed, 95% Cl	M-H, Fixed, 95% Cl		
Asfar 2017	7	217	4	217	9.6%	1.75 [0.52 , 5.89]			
Barrot 2020	0	102	5	99	13.4%	0.09 [0.00 , 1.58]	• • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • •		
Schjørring 2021	29	1457	32	1453	77.0%	0.90 [0.55 , 1.49]	- 		
Total (95% CI)		1776		1769	100.0%	0.88 [0.56 , 1.36]			
Total events:	36		41						
Heterogeneity: Chi ² =	3.70, df = 2	2 (P = 0.1	6); l ² = 46	%			0.01 0.1 1 10 100		
Test for overall effect:	Z = 0.59 (F	P = 0.55)					Favours higher Favours lower		
Test for subgroup differences: Not applicable									
Fig. 3 Meta-analysis of mesenteric ischaemia at longest follow-up. M-H, Fixed denotes Mantel–Haenszel fixed-effect model, CI confidence interval. Chen et al. reported the RR for mesenteric ischaemia as 1.15 (95% CI 0.73–1.19)									

	High	ner	Low	/er		Risk ratio	Risk ratio	
Study or Subgroup	Events	Total	Events	Total	Weight	M-H, Fixed, 95% Cl	M-H, Fixed, 95% Cl	
Asfar 2017	30	217	32	217	40.2%	0.94 [0.59 , 1.49]		
Barrot 2020	22	102	17	99	21.7%	1.26 [0.71 , 2.22]	_ _ _	
Girardis 2016	37	225	30	220	38.1%	1.21 [0.77 , 1.88]	-	
Total (95% CI)		544		536	100.0%	1.11 [0.84 , 1.46]		
Total events:	89		79				ľ	
Heterogeneity: Chi ² =	0.83, df = 2	2 (P = 0.6	66); l² = 0%	, D			0.01 0.1 1 10 100	
Test for overall effect: $Z = 0.73$ (P = 0.47)							Favours Higher Favours Lower	
Test for subgroup differences: Not applicable								

Fig. 4 Meta-analysis of pneumonia at longest follow-up. M-H, Fixed denotes Mantel–Haenszel fixed-effect model, CI confidence interval. Chen et al. reported the RR for pneumonia as 0.92 (95% CI 0.72–1.18)

	High	ner	Low	/er		Risk ratio	Risk ratio
Study or Subgroup	Events	Total	Events	Total	Weight	M-H, Fixed, 95% CI	M-H, Fixed, 95% Cl
Barrot 2020	1	102	4	99	17.2%	0.24 [0.03 , 2.13]	
Mackle 2020	1	481	0	484	2.1%	3.02 [0.12 , 73.92]	
Schjørring 2021	23	1457	19	1453	80.7%	1.21 [0.66 , 2.21]	-
Total (95% CI)		2040		2036	100.0%	1.08 [0.62 , 1.88]	•
Total events:	25		23				Ť
Heterogeneity: Chi ² =	2.34, df = 2	2 (P = 0.3	31); l² = 15	%			0.01 0.1 1 10 100
Test for overall effect:	Z = 0.27 (F	Favours higher Favours lower					
Test for subgroup diffe	erences: No	ot applica	ble				
Fig. 5 Meta-analysis of	stroke at lon	aest follov	v-up M-H F	ixed deno	tes Mantel	–Haenszel fixed-effect m	odel CL confidence interval. Chen et al

Fig. 5 Meta-analysis of stroke at longest follow-up. M-H, Fixed denotes Mantel–Haenszel fixed-effect model, CI confidence interval. Chen et al. reported the RR for stroke as 0.93 (95% CI 0.53–1.63)

Abbreviations

CI: Confidence interval; FiO₂: Fraction of inspired oxygen; HOT-ICU trial: Handling Oxygenation Targets in the Intensive Care Unit trial; M-H, Fixed: Mantel-Haenszel fixed-effect model; mmHg: Millimetres of mercury; PaO₂: Partial pressure of arterial oxygen.

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Authors' contributions

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Declarations

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Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

TLK and OLS are coordinating investigators of the Handling Oxygenation Targets in the Intensive Care Unit (HOT-ICU) trial. FMN and TLK are coordinating investigators of the Handling Oxygenation Targets in COVID-19 (HOT-COVID) trial. BSR is the sponsor and primary investigator of both the HOT-ICU and HOT-COVID trials. All authors are part of a working group currently updating the latest Cochrane review concerned with higher or lower oxygen levels in critically ill patients [14].

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