Measuring peak flow enhances adherence to monitoring in asthma

Peak expiratory flow (PEF) monitoring is recommended in the management of moderate to severe asthma, and PEF outcome variables are used in many clinical trials. However, adherence with PEF monitoring is poor, and this is often attributed to the burden of measurement and recording. This analysis examined whether adherence with symptom monitoring was impaired by asking patients also to record PEF measurements.

Data were obtained from a randomised double blind study of breathing techniques in adults with poorly controlled asthma. Full details of the clinical trial are reported elsewhere.

Subjects were non-smokers aged 19–80 years, using reliever as-needed ≥4 times/week and taking inhaled corticosteroids ≥200 µg/day. Figure 1 shows the study design, with between-visit intervals of 2 or 6 weeks. Throughout the study, 57 subjects used electronic diary spirometers (AM2, Erich Jaeger GmbH, Hoechberg, Germany) twice daily to monitor peak expiratory flow (PEF). We used subjects as their own controls as they crossed over between periods.

In contrast with the perception that PEF monitoring is burdensome to patients, this analysis showed that, with electronic diaries, asking adults to measure PEF significantly improved their adherence with monitoring. While a randomised study would be required to formally evaluate the impact of PEF measurement on adherence with monitoring, this is the first study to assess differences in adherence with monitoring with and without PEF. We used subjects as their own controls as they crossed over between periods.

We have previously reported good adherence with long-term electronic monitoring of symptoms and PEF data, when PEF data were closely incorporated into asthma management. In the present study, good adherence was also achieved with similar electronic devices, despite the routine nature of the monitoring for assessment of study outcome variables and the absence of physician feedback to subjects.

Adherence represents a balance between burden and benefit, both real and perceived. Although electronic devices can reduce the burden of monitoring in asthma, patients may perceive little personal benefit from recording how they feel (symptom monitoring). By contrast, PEF monitoring provides patients with objective information, complementary to their subjective experience.

Such personal feedback may act as an incentive, improving adherence with monitoring, even if the PEF data are not—as in previous electronic monitoring studies—interpreted by a clinician or displayed on-screen as a time-trend analysis.

Self-monitoring is a cornerstone of chronic disease management and clinical trial design by providing data about patients’ day-to-day status that is not captured by interval assessments. Although patients who agree to participate in clinical trials are likely, by nature, to be more adherent than those in clinical practice, plans for monitoring in either setting should incorporate strategies which enhance adherence and preclude retrospective completion, and hence improve the validity and utility of self-recorded data. The present findings show that the provision of feedback to patients, such as by PEF measurement, may improve rather than hamper adherence with monitoring, provided the burden of monitoring is minimised by use of patient-friendly electronic devices.

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The clinical trial from which these data were obtained was conducted data analysis with input from Wei Xuan and HKR. CAS and HKR co-wrote the manuscript. The clinical trial protocol was developed by Christine R Jenkins and HKR and approved by the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training via an Australian Postgraduate Award.

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Assessing the efficacy of spirometry for smoking cessation

In a recent issue of *Thorax* Bednarek et al* presented interesting results from a large-scale prospective cohort study on the effect of combining spirometric tests with simple smoking cessation advice in 3077 middle-aged smokers with previously undetected airflow obstruction. Carbon monoxide-validated smoking cessation rates after 12 months of follow-up were 16% in subjects with airflow obstruction and 12% in smokers without airflow obstruction. These results are promising; however, we think that the authors’ conclusion that spirometric screening of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is effective in smoking cessation is too far-reaching because of the limitations of the study design.

The conclusion by Bednarek et al* that spirometry is efficacious in smoking cessation is limited by the fact that their study was not a randomised controlled trial but a prospective cohort study comparing smokers with previously undetected airflow obstruction with those without airflow obstruction. This might have introduced bias. It is possible, for example, that the smokers with airflow obstruction in this study might have been more susceptible to the “health warnings” given by the doctor who evaluated the spirometric test results with them. This higher susceptibility to health warnings might be by the fact that the follow-up response rate was significantly higher among subjects with airflow obstruction (87%) than in those without airflow obstruction (62%), and that the follow-up response rate was associated with disease severity (90% in moderate to severe airflow obstruction compared with 81% in mild obstruction). Another problem is that neither prospective nor retrospective data appear to have been collected on whether smokers used pharmaceutical aids for smoking cessation on their own initiative during the 12 months of follow-up. The use of pharmaceutical aids for smoking cessation (such as nicotine replacement therapy, bupropion or nortriptyline) is more effective than behavioural treatment (advice) alone.* It cannot be ruled out that this use was higher in the group with airflow obstruction who were more likely to be older, to be more addicted to nicotine and tobacco and to have a longer smoking history (and therefore more pack years)—all of which are predictors of treatment outcome.* We therefore suggest that the use of spirometry for smoking cessation should be tested in a homogeneous group of smokers with previously undetected airflow obstruction who are randomised to undergo either counselling including confrontation with spirometry or counselling without confrontation. We are currently conducting such a trial (ISRCTN 64881813).

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Authors’ reply

We thank Dr Kotz and colleagues for their interest in our investigations and look forward to the results of their study.* Our study did not confirm the opinion that spirometric tests showing normal lung function would encourage smokers to continue to smoke. We are aware that our investigations were not randomised and pointed this out in the discussion. This weakness was also stressed in the accompanying editorial by Mannino.* We observed that smokers introduced by the use of pharmacological treatment by smokers in our study during 1 year of follow-up, we would like to repeat that (1) in the study protocol smokers were asked to use their own motivation only to stop smoking and not to take pharmacological treatment, and (2) during the follow-up visit all subjects confirmed compliance with the protocol. Although we cannot exclude the possibility that deviation from the protocol may have occurred in some cases, it seems unlikely. Pharmacological treatment of nicotine dependence is not reimbursed and is relatively expensive in Poland. Bupropion is on prescription and only nicotine replacement therapy is available over the counter.

The suggestion that approaching younger smokers would be more rewarding is worth exploring. In our experience, airflow obstruction is much less frequent (10%) in smokers aged 35–40 years than in older age groups. Since younger smokers are also less inclined to stop smoking, perhaps smoking cessation clinics would be more cost effective for this group than spirometric testing.

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Spirometric screening for COPD: wishful thinking, not evidence

The effect of spirometric screening on smoking cessation rates in the before and after study reported by Bednarek and colleagues* is interpreted by the authors and, with reservations, in the accompanying editorial by Mannino* as evidence to support the introduction of spirometric screening to detect early chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). This goes against the evidence of the study itself, and opposes the results of the comparative study of spirometric screening published by the same workers in 2004.* Bednarek et al* show an effect of spirometric screening in smokers with moderate or severe COPD (using Global Initiative for Chronic Obstructive Lung Disease European Respiratory Society criteria), but no effect in mild COPD despite the large numbers in their study. They repeat the findings of their earlier study, which is not mentioned in this paper by the authors themselves, nor is it mentioned by Mannino in his editorial. What is going on? Is there any significance in the fact that this work comes out of a programme entitled National Program of Early Detection and Prevention of COPD?* What seems to be clear from this work is that there is no evidence that early detection leads to prevention of COPD.

In the first study Gorecka et al* also claimed that their findings supported spirometric screening in mild disease. In fact they showed no overall effect, found evidence of an effect in a subgroup analysis of subjects with moderate or severe obstructive lung disease, and went on to make claims for the role of screening: “All smokers irrespective of their lung function tried to modify the habit as the result of screening for COPD combined with smoking cessation advice. The diagnosis of AL (airway limitation) motivated smokers to quit smoking.”* Yet the results state unequivocally that there was no difference between smokers who had airflow limitation diagnosed and those who had normal lung function (NLF): “The

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