Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Air travel and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease: a new algorithm for pre-flight evaluation

Anne Edvardsen,1,2 Aina Akerø,2 Carl C Christensen,1 Morten Ryg,1 Ole H Skjønsberg2,3

ABSTRACT

Background The reduced pressure in the aircraft cabin may cause significant hypoxemia and respiratory distress in patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Simple and reliable methods for predicting the need for supplemental oxygen during air travel have been requested.

Objective To construct a pre-flight evaluation algorithm for patients with COPD.

Methods In this prospective, cross-sectional study of 100 patients with COPD referred to hypoxia-altitude simulation test (HAST), sea level pulse oximetry at rest (SpO2 SL) and exercise desaturation (SpO2 6MWT) were used to evaluate whether the patient is fit to fly without further assessment, needs further evaluation with HAST or should receive in-flight supplemental oxygen without further evaluation. HAST was used as the reference method.

Results An algorithm was constructed using a combination of SpO2 SL and SpO2 6MWT. Categories for SpO2 SL were >95%, 92–95% and <92%, the cut-off value for SpO2 6MWT was calculated as 84%. Arterial oxygen pressure (PaO2) <6.6 kPa was the criterion for recommending supplemental oxygen. This algorithm had a sensitivity of 100% and a specificity of 80% when tested prospectively on an independent sample of patients with COPD (n=50). Patients with SpO2 SL >95% combined with SpO2 6MWT ≥84% may travel by air without further assessment. In-flight supplemental oxygen is recommended if SpO2 SL=92–95% combined with SpO2 6MWT <84% or if SpO2 SL <92%. Otherwise, HAST should be performed.

Conclusions The presented algorithm is simple and appears to be a reliable tool for pre-flight evaluation of patients with COPD.

INTRODUCTION

The reduced atmospheric pressure in the aircraft cabin may cause severe in-flight hypoxemia and respiratory symptoms in patients with lung disease, for example, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).1–3 With the growing prevalence of COPD4–7 and a large proportion of patients with COPD travelling by air,8,9 simple and practical methods for pre-flight evaluation of the patients’ fitness to air travel have been requested.1,3,11

Current air travel statements1,2,12 recommend supplemental oxygen when the arterial oxygen pressure (PaO2) is expected to fall below 6.6 or 7.3 kPa (50 or 55 mm Hg). Various lung function variables, prediction equations and algorithms have been proposed to estimate in-flight PaO2, the need for in-flight supplemental oxygen, and to select patients needing more advanced pre-flight testing, such as the hypoxia-altitude simulation test (HAST).8,13–20 HAST is considered to be the clinical ‘gold standard’3,21 but is time consuming and not widely available. Thus, it is important to minimise the number of patients needing referral to HAST. Prediction equations, sea level PaO2 and spirometric values alone have proven not to be reliable tools for estimating the risk of severe in-flight hypoxaemia.1,3–5,16,22 In an algorithm published by the British Thoracic Society (BTS), sea-level oxygen saturation by pulse oximetry (SpO2 SL) was used as a discriminating variable,13 and it was recently confirmed that a SpO2 SL <92% seems to be an appropriate cut-off value for recommending in-flight supplemental oxygen without further pre-flight evaluation.23 For SpO2 SL ≥92%, however, the predictive properties for detecting in-flight hypoxaemia were lower.23 It has been shown that both exercise desaturation15–22 and aerobic capacity16,17 correlate significantly with in-flight PaO2. Thus, it would be of interest to study if a combination of SpO2 SL and standardised exercise testing could be used to minimise the number of patients needing more cumbersome pre-flight testing. Our hypothesis was that a combination of SpO2 SL and oxygen desaturation during a 6 min walk test (6MWT) can be used to differentiate between patients with COPD needing or not needing
supplemental oxygen during air travel, and patients who need further pre-flight evaluation with HAST.

To test this hypothesis, SpO2 was measured in a group of patients with COPD at rest and during a 6MWT, and the results were compared with oxygen tension and saturation obtained during HAST. The primary aim of the study was to develop a simple and reliable algorithm for pre-flight evaluation of patients with COPD based on these variables. The secondary aim of the study was to evaluate if HAST can be performed with SpO2 as a substitute for PaO2, since use of a non-invasive HAST could make the test simpler to perform and thereby more available.

METHODS
This prospective cross-sectional study was performed at a pulmonary rehabilitation hospital in Norway. The Regional Committee for Medical Research Ethics approved the study (S-08640b), and written informed consent was obtained from the participants. The study was recorded in ClinicalTrials.gov (NCT00896584).

Construction of the algorithm
The construction of the algorithm was based on sea-level measurements of lung function, blood gases, pulse oximetry and 6MWT. For recommending in-flight oxygen, PaO2 HAST < 6.6 kPa was chosen.1 14 21 26 To make the algorithm practical and clinically useful, the non-invasive variables with highest correlation to PaO2 HAST were analysed with receiver operating characteristics (ROC) analysis, first including all participants and second with subjects grouped according to SpO2 > 95%, 92–95% and < 92%.13 Results from the ROC analyses served as a basis for the construction of the algorithm, and thereafter all subjects were individually tested for calculation of the sensitivity and specificity of the new algorithm. Finally, the algorithm was prospectively validated on an independent sample of patients with COPD.

Subjects
One hundred and thirty-nine consecutive patients with COPD who were referred from chest physicians in southern Norway to pre-flight evaluation were invited to participate in the study. The referral criteria were moderate to very severe COPD according to the Global Initiative for Chronic Obstructive Lung Disease (GOLD).27 previous air travel intolerance, or SpO2 SL ≤ 95%.1 13 The inclusion criteria were a diagnosis of moderate to severe COPD27 and the ability to perform a 6MWT. Exclusion criteria were unstable angina, uncontrolled hypertension, uncontrolled arrhythmia and long-term oxygen treatment. Thirty-nine patients were excluded, resulting in a study population of 100 subjects (figure 1). Sixty-nine of the participants had known comorbidities, the most frequent being systemic arterial hypertension, ischaemic heart disease and muscular-skeletal disorders. All patients used their daily medication.

Fifty additional patients with COPD who were referred to HAST with equal criteria as the study population were used to validate the algorithm.

Sea-level measurements and HAST
Lung function tests were performed according to standard criteria. SpO2 SL was measured with pulse oximetry (Nonin 3100 Wristox or Nonin PalmSat 2500, Nonin Medical Inc, North Plymouth, Massachusetts, USA), and simultaneously an arterial blood sample was drawn from a radial artery catheter and immediately analysed (ABL200 Flex, Radiometer, Copenhagen, Denmark). Exercise-related dyspnoea was measured with the modified Medical Research Council Dyspnoea Scale (mMRC).28

The 6MWT was performed in accordance with standard criteria,29 and SpO2 and dyspnoea (Borg CR1030) were recorded every minute. None of the patients used supplemental oxygen during the 6MWT.

HAST was used to simulate a cabin pressure corresponding to an altitude of 2438 m above sea level (3000 ft).6 The subjects breathed 15.1% oxygen (15.1% O2, 84.9% N2, Yara Praxair, Norway) from a non-diffusing gas collection bag (170 litre Douglas-bag, Hans Rudolph Inc, Shawnee, USA) through a facemask (Mirage Full Face Mask, ResMed Corp, Poway, California, USA), and arterial blood samples were taken after 15 min hypoxic exposure.6 10 The SpO2 should be stable for 5 min before arterial blood sampling, otherwise the test was prolonged to 20 min. Electrocardiogram, SpO2 and dyspnoea were continuously monitored. The patients were recommended in-flight supplemental oxygen if PaO2 HAST was < 6.6 kPa.1

Statistics
To calculate sample size, we assumed that sensitivity and specificity would be approximately 80% in the planned study. It was then shown that 100 patients were needed to construct a new algorithm in which sensitivity and specificity should have CI length < 16%. Patient characteristics are presented as mean and SD, unless otherwise specified. Relations between PaO2 HAST and patient characteristics were assessed from Pearson’s correlation coefficient and one-way repeated measures analysis of variance. ROC analyses were performed with sea-level SpO2, SpO2 during 6MWT (SpO2 6MWT) and walking distance against PaO2 HAST < 6.6 kPa as the discriminating variables. Statistical analyses were performed with FASW software (V18.0; Chicago, Illinois, USA). Differences were considered significant if p < 0.05.

RESULTS
Patient characteristics
The study comprised patients with COPD (n = 100), with demographic characteristics as presented in table 1. According to the GOLD classification,27 22%, 46% and 32% were in the GOLD categories II, III and IV, respectively.

Sea-level SpO2 was used as a grouping variable as follows: SpO2 SL > 95% (12% of patients), SpO2 SL 92–95% (55% of patients) and SpO2 SL < 92% (33% of patients).

HAST
All patients were tested with HAST. Mean HAST values for PaO2 and SpO2 were 6.3 kPa (SD 0.6 kPa) and 83% (SD 4%), respectively. Seventy-three per cent of patients had a PaO2 HAST < 6.6 kPa, indicating that they, in accordance with current
good diagnostic properties (area under curve 0.78 and 0.79, respectively) for detection of in-flight PaO₂ <6.6 kPa (figure 2). The patients were grouped and data analysed according to the BTS pulse oximetry categories, SpO₂ SL >95%, 92–98% and <92% (figure 3). In the group with sea-level SpO₂ SL <92%, 30 of 91% patients dropped below the recommended level for minimum in-flight PaO₂ (6.6 kPa), and were thereby in need of supplemental oxygen during air travel. Regarding the 55 patients in the group with SpO₂ SL from 92% to 95%, a ROC analysis with SpO₂ 6MWT showed good prognostic properties (area under curve 0.80) for detection of in-flight PaO₂ <6.6 kPa. The suggested cut-off value was SpO₂ 6MWT <84% (sensitivity 88%, 95% CI 80% to 96%; specificity 69%, 95% CI 52% to 85%). With regard to patients with SpO₂ SL >95%, 5 of 12 (42%) had an in-flight PaO₂ <6.6 kPa. In this group, ROC analysis showed exercise desaturation as a good prognostic variable, with an optimal cut-off value for SpO₂ 6MWT <84% (area under curve 0.71; sensitivity 80%, 95% CI 40% to 100%; specificity 71%, 95% CI 29% to 100%).

Algorithm

Based on the above analyses a pre-flight evaluation algorithm was constructed (figure 4). The algorithm was based on sea-level resting pulse oximetry (SpO₂ SL) and exercise desaturation during the 6MWT (SpO₂ 6MWT) as the primary and secondary discriminator for evaluating whether the patient was fit to fly without further assessment, in need of further evaluation with HAST or should receive in-flight supplemental oxygen without further evaluation.

The pre-flight evaluation algorithm had a sensitivity of 99% (95% CI 96% to 100%) and a specificity of 82% (95% CI 67% to 96%) when all 100 subjects were individually tested. According to the algorithm, one-third (33%) of the patients would be advised to perform extended pre-flight testing with HAST. Six per cent of the patients were not correctly classified by the algorithm; of these, one patient was misclassified as fit to fly despite a PaO₂ HAST <6.6 kPa (SpO₂ SL 97% and SpO₂ 6MWT 87%, measured PaO₂ HAST 6.3 kPa), and five patients would have been recommended to use in-flight oxygen without, in fact, having a PaO₂ HAST <6.6 kPa (mean PaO₂ HAST 7.2 kPa (SD 0.3 kPa)). The patients selected by the algorithm for further pre-flight evaluation with HAST had a mean PaO₂ HAST of 6.6 kPa (SD 0.6 kPa).

After the algorithm was established, it was prospectively validated on an independent sample of 50 patients with COPD who were referred to HAST (table 3). Eight patients had SpO₂ SL >95% (16%), 27 patients had SpO₂ SL 92–95% (54%) and 15 patients had SpO₂ SL <92% (30%). For all but four patients a correct choice was obtained with regard to use of in-flight supplemental oxygen. These four patients were recommended

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**Table 1** Baseline patient characteristics, n=100

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex, M/F</th>
<th>% Predicted</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>42/58</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

**Table 2** Variables with significant correlation to PaO₂ during HAST, n=100

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>r</th>
<th>p Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baseline PaO₂, kPa</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise SpO₂, %</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline SpO₂, %</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6MWT, distance, m</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age, years</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEV₁, litres</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.027</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6MWT, 6 min walk test; FEV₁, forced expiratory volume in 1 s; HAST, hypoxia-altitude simulation test; PaO₂, arterial oxygen pressure; SpO₂, arterial oxygen saturation by pulse oximetry.
supplemental oxygen without having a PaO₂ <6.6 kPa. However, it should be noted that they all had PaO₂ values close to the recommended limit (mean PaO₂ 6.6 kPa (SD 0.1 kPa)). The sensitivity and specificity for the algorithm in this independent sample of patients were 100% (95% CI 90% to 100%) and 80% (95% CI 60% to 95%), respectively. The 20 patients which the algorithm selected for further pre-flight evaluation with HAST had a mean PaO₂ of 6.9 kPa (SD 0.5 kPa).

HAST: PaO₂ versus SpO₂
The secondary aim was to evaluate if HAST can be performed with SpO₂ as a substitute for PaO₂. There was a strong correlation between PaO₂ and SpO₂ (r = 0.81, p < 0.001) during HAST. The area under the ROC curve when using pulse oximetry to detect in-flight PaO₂ <6.6 kPa was 0.93, indicating strong prognostic properties for the method (figure 5). The analysis suggested a cut-off value for SpO₂ <6.6 kPa of 85% with a sensitivity of 59% (95% CI 81% to 96%) and a specificity of 81% (95% CI 67% to 96%) when SpO₂ was used as a substitute for PaO₂ HAST <6.6 kPa (figure 5). When using SpO₂ HAST, instead of PaO₂ HAST an independent sample of 50 patients with COPD, we obtained a sensitivity of 90% (95% CI 77% to 100%) and a specificity of 85% (95% CI 70% to 100%). Three patients were misclassified as fit to fly despite having PaO₂ HAST <6.6 kPa (mean PaO₂ 6.3 kPa), and three patients would have been recommended to use in-flight oxygen without, in fact, having a PaO₂ HAST <6.6 kPa (mean PaO₂ HAST 6.7 kPa).

DISCUSSION
A large number of patients with COPD travel by air, most of them without severe in-flight medical problems. However, some patients develop severe hypoxaemia. Thus, simple and consistent pre-flight assessment guidance regarding the need for in-flight supplemental oxygen has been requested. In the present study we have constructed and validated a simple and clinically feasible algorithm for pre-flight assessment of patients with COPD based on sea-level resting SpO₂ and SpO₂ values during a 6MWT.

**Figure 2** Receiver operating characteristics curves: (A) sea-level SpO₂, with PaO₂ HAST <6.6 kPa or ≥6.6 kPa as the discriminating variable, area under curve 0.78; and (B) SpO₂ during the 6MWT, with PaO₂ HAST <6.6 kPa or ≥6.6 kPa as the discriminating variable, area under curve 0.79. 6MWT, 6 min walk test; HAST: hypoxia-altitude simulation test; PaO₂, arterial oxygen pressure; SpO₂, arterial oxygen saturation measured with pulse oximetry.

**Figure 3** SpO₂ during 6MWT versus PaO₂ HAST. Patients are grouped after sea-level SpO₂ >95%, 92–95% and <92%. Recommended level for minimum in-flight PaO₂ (6.6 kPa) and cut-off for exercise desaturation (84%) is marked. 6MWT, 6 min walk test; HAST, hypoxia-altitude simulation test; PaO₂, arterial oxygen pressure; SpO₂, arterial oxygen saturation measured with pulse oximetry; ●, SpO₂ >95%; ○, SpO₂ 92–95%; □, SpO₂ <92%.

**Figure 4** Pre-flight evaluation algorithm. 6MWT, 6 min walk test; alt, alternatively; HAST, hypoxia-altitude simulation test; PaO₂, arterial oxygen pressure; SpO₂, arterial oxygen saturation measured with pulse oximetry.
Six min walk test and arterial oxygen saturation measured with pulse oximetry provides useful information in the evaluation of patients with COPD intending to travel by air, especially if the number of unequivocal findings needing more extensive pre-flight evaluation is reduced.

The results from our group have previously indicated that the BTS algorithm with only sea-level SpO2 cannot be used with confidence to predict in-flight hypoxaemia. A large number of patients at risk of developing severe hypoxaemia was not detected, and a considerable number of patients needed more advanced pre-flight evaluation. By adding a 6MWT, including measurement of SpO2, the current study shows that the number of patients needing referral to HAST was markedly reduced. The 6MWT is a widely used test to assess exercise performance in patients with COPD, and is much more available than HAST. However, it is important that the 6MWT is performed according to guidelines, and it must be stressed that shortcuts must be avoided.

Various proposed equations and single sea-level variables have proven not to predict in-flight hypoxaemia with a satisfactory precision. Several authors have suggested that exercise-related outcomes may be useful discriminators. Previous studies from our group show that aerobic capacity correlates with in-flight hypoxaemia. Since oxygen saturation measured with pulse oximetry at rest and during a 6MWT, is frequently used in the medical care of patients with COPD, an algorithm employing a combination of these variables would be simple to implement in a busy clinical practice. An assessment algorithm that can discriminate between patients who will need supplemental oxygen during air travel and those who can travel without such equipment would be of considerable value in the evaluation of patients with COPD intending to travel by air, especially if the number of unequivocal findings needing more extensive pre-flight evaluation is reduced.

The data are presented as n (%) and mean (SD). PaCO2, kPa 4.9 (0.6) PaO2, kPa 6.9 (0.5) TLC, litres 7.6 (1.6) RV, litres 4.4 (1.3) Exercise SpO2, % 82 (4) SpO2, % 85 (4) Dyspnoea, Borg CR10 6.4 (2.2) FEV1, litres 1.1 (0.4) 40.2 (15.1) SpO2 HAST, % 93 (3) Blood gases and pulse oximetry at sea level PaO2, kPa 9.0 (1.1) PaCO2, kPa 5.1 (0.6) SpO2, % 85 (4) Six min walk test Distance, m 425 (109) Exercise SpO2, % 82 (4) Dyspnoea, Borg CR10 6.4 (2.2) HAST blood gases and pulse oximetry PaO2, kPa 6.5 (0.5) PaCO2, kPa 4.9 (0.6) SpO2, % 85 (4) SpO2, % 85 (4) L,CO, diffusing capacity of the lung for carbon monoxide; FEV1%predicted, forced expiratory volume in 1 s in percent of predicted; FVC, forced vital capacity; HAST, hypoxia-altitude simulation test; PaCO2, arterial carbon dioxide pressure; PaO2, arterial oxygen pressure; RV, residual volume; SaO2, arterial oxygen saturation; SpO2, arterial oxygen saturation by pulse oximetry; TLC, total lung capacity; VA, alveolar volume.

### Table 3 Baseline characteristics for patients used in the separate validation of the algorithm, n=50

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<th>Sex, M/F</th>
<th>25/25</th>
<th>% Predicted</th>
</tr>
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<td>Age, years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lung function</td>
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<tr>
<td>FEV1, litres</td>
<td>1.1 (0.4)</td>
<td>40.2 (15.1)</td>
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<td>FEV1/FVC</td>
<td>0.41 (0.09)</td>
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<td>DL,CO, mmol/min/kPa</td>
<td>3.0 (1.5)</td>
<td>36 (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DL,CO/VA, mmol/min/kPa/litre</td>
<td>0.6 (0.3)</td>
<td>44 (21)</td>
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<tr>
<td>TLC, litres</td>
<td>7.6 (1.6)</td>
<td>127 (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RV, litres</td>
<td>4.4 (1.3)</td>
<td>198 (50)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blood gases and pulse oximetry at sea level</td>
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<tr>
<td>PaO2, kPa</td>
<td>9.0 (1.1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PaCO2, kPa</td>
<td>5.1 (0.6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SpO2, %</td>
<td>85 (4)</td>
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<td>Six min walk test</td>
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<tr>
<td>Distance, m</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exercise SpO2, %</td>
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<td>Dyspnoea, Borg CR10</td>
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<td>HAST blood gases and pulse oximetry</td>
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<tr>
<td>PaO2, kPa</td>
<td>6.5 (0.5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PaCO2, kPa</td>
<td>4.9 (0.6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SpO2, %</td>
<td>85 (4)</td>
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</table>

#### Figure 5 Receiver operating characteristics curve of SpO2 HAST as a substitute for PaO2 HAST < or ≥ 6.6 kPa, area under curve 0.93. HAST, hypoxia-altitude simulation test; PaO2, arterial oxygen pressure; SpO2, arterial oxygen saturation measured with pulse oximetry.
whom the algorithm is intended. One must also keep in mind that the present study only comprised patients with moderate to very severe COPD and that the algorithm may not be applicable to patients with other lung diseases.

In conclusion, an algorithm for pre-flight evaluation of patients with COPD is presented, employing simple non-invasive oximetry at rest and during walking. By using the algorithm, the majority of a population consisting of patients with moderate to very severe COPD could be classified as fit to fly or in need of supplemental oxygen without more advanced pre-flight assessment.

Acknowledgements
Leiv Sandvik, Professor in Biostatistics, Oslo University Hospital, is gratefully acknowledged.

Contributors
AE and MR: conception and design of the study, collecting, analysing and interpreting the data, drafting and revising the manuscript. AA: conception and design of the study, interpreting the data, drafting and revising the manuscript. CCC: conception and design of the study, collecting and interpreting the data, drafting and revising the manuscript. OHS: conception and design of the study, analysing and interpreting the data, drafting and revising the manuscript.

Funding
The study was funded by grants from The Norwegian Heart and Lung Patient Organisation and The Norwegian Foundation for Health and Rehabilitation.

Competing interests
None.

Ethics approval
Ethics approval was provided by the Regional Norwegian Committee for Medical Research Ethics.

Provenance and peer review
Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

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Air travel and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease: a new algorithm for pre-flight evaluation
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Thorax 2012 67: 964-969 originally published online July 5, 2012
doi: 10.1136/thoraxjnl-2012-201855

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