Can postural OSA be usefully identified from its severity alone?

Aihem Johar, Chris D Turnbull, John R Stradling

ABSTRACT

Introduction When obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA) does not occur throughout sleep, there must be factors influencing its presence or absence. These are most likely to be sleep stage, posture and presleep alcohol, among others. We hypothesised that as OSA severity increases, the likelihood of postural OSA (POSA) would also decrease.

Methods Laboratory sleep studies of 39 patients with OSA were manually reviewed to calculate supine and non-supine oxygen desaturation indices (ODI). The usual definition for POSA was used, a ratio of supine to non-supine ODI of ≥2.

Results The mean age was 53.2 (SD 12.4) years, the body mass index was 35.0 (SD 8.9) kg/m² and 74% were male. The median supine ODI was 54.3 (IQR 25.7–73.5) and non-supine ODI was 18.7 (IQR 8.6–38.4). The overall prevalence of POSA was 56%. The prevalence of POSA for ODI of <40 was 68%, and 35% if ≥40.

Conclusions An ODI ≥40, compared with <40, halved the likelihood of POSA from 68% to 35%. Although there is clearly a relationship between overall ODI and POSA, it is not strong enough to diagnose an individual with POSA. However the relationship provides a useful way to prescreen trial subjects to enrich for POSA.

INTRODUCTION

When severe obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA) is present continuously throughout the night, its presence is unlikely to depend on such variables as sleep state, posture or presleep alcohol. As the all-night oxygen desaturation index (ODI) falls from 60 to, say, 30, usually this does not mean that apnoeas are now 2 min long, rather than 1 min, but that there are apnoeas (with the usual cycle time of about a minute) for only half the sleep time. Supine position clearly worsens OSA in many, due to increased compliance and collapsibility of the pharynx. This increase in collapsibility is thought to be due to the direct gravitational effects of the mandible on the upper airway, and indirectly to a reduced functional residual capacity when supine, reducing the caudal traction on the pharyngeal walls, and thus reducing the bracing effect from such traction. Postural treatments for OSA have been used for many years, and their popularity has increased recently with the introduction of posture-control devices that are somewhat more sophisticated than the tennis-ball-in-the-back-of-the-pyjamas approach. It is usually argued that a patient should have significant postural dependency to make a trial of such a treatment worthwhile. The exact definition of postural OSA (POSA) varies, but most commonly it is arbitrarily defined as a supine to non-supine ratio in the apnoea/hypopnoea index (AHI) or ODI of ≥2. With a view to potential efficacy of treatments, some have argued that the non-supine AHI should also be <5 to be defined as POSA. There are very few robust data on postural therapies for OSA, with no placebo-controlled trials reporting longer term symptom-based primary outcomes. Such multicentre trials in ordinary clinical units are needed and will require simple recruitment strategies if they are to be clinically useful. We wondered if the severity of OSA on its own could be usefully used to prescreen patients for entry into such trials of POSA therapy, since earlier studies have suggested a falling off of POSA prevalence as the AHI increases.

METHODS

Fifty clinical sleep studies (VISI-Lab, Stowood Scientific Instruments, Oxford, UK) between May and July 2016 were sequentially selected from patients diagnosed with OSA. Studies were excluded if technically inadequate, or from patients with significant associated central sleep apnoea (CSA) or hypoventilation, an ODI <3, or those with <30 min of either supine or non-supine sleep. The remaining sleep studies were carefully reviewed to calculate the ODI, both supine and non-supine,

Key messages

► As the severity of obstructive sleep apnoea increases, the presence of a postural component decreases.
► Subjects with oxygen desaturation indices under 40/hour have double the prevalence of postural obstructive sleep apnoea compared with indices above 40 (68% vs 35%).

NIHR Oxford Biomedical Research Centre and Oxford Centre for Respiratory Medicine, Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Churchill Hospital, Oxford, UK

Correspondence to: Professor John R Stradling; John.Stradling@ouh.nhs.uk


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having POSA increased as the ODI fell, such that if
the all-night ODI was < 40, then the prevalence was
almost double (68%) that of those with an all-night
ODI ≥ 40 (35%). At the conventional ODI cut-off point
for mild/moderate versus severe OSA of 30, the
prevalences of POSA in the mild/moderate and severe
groups were 75% and 37%, respectively. The 32%
prevalence of non-POSA in those with an all-night
ODI of < 40 is presumably due to other factors that
only provoke OSA for part of the night, such as
rapid-eye-movement sleep. Thus the diagnostic ODI
from a sleep study, where posture is not routinely
measured, could be used to enrich the likelihood of
finding POSA when, for example, screening a patient
for entry into a randomised controlled trial of POSA
therapy. However, at a clinical level, it may not be
useful since, even at ODI values over 40, there is still
a one-third chance that a patient will have POSA,
using the conventional 2:1 supine to non-supine defi-
nition.

RESULTS
Forty-six out of 50 sleep studies were technically satis-
factory for this analysis. Three were further excluded
due to hypoventilation or CSA, three due to < 30 min
of supine sleep and one due to an all-night ODI < 5,
leaving 39 for the final analysis. The mean age of this
study group was 53.2 (SD 12.4) years, the body mass
index was 35.0 (SD 8.9) kg/m² and 74% were male.
The median all-night ODI was 28.6 (IQR 17.2–51.4),
supine ODI was 54.3 (IQR 25.7–73.5) and non-supine
ODI was 18.7 (IQR 8.6–38.4). The clear relationship
between the all-night ODI and the ratio of supine to
non-supine ODI is shown in figure 1 (Spearman’s rank
correlation, −0.44, P < 0.005). Taking the arbitrary defi-
nition for POSA as a ratio of ≥ 2, the overall prevalence
was 56%. If the all-night ODI was < 40, then the prev-
ance of POSA was 68%, and if ≥ 40 then the prev-
ance was 35%. The prevalence of POSA when the all-night
ODI is over 60 appears much smaller (figure 1), but
our study numbers do not allow a robust estimate.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS
The overall prevalence of POSA was 56%, in line
with previous reports. As expected, the likelihood of
having POSA increased as the ODI fell, such that if

Figure 1 Relationship between all-night oxygen
desaturation index (ODI) and the ratio of supine to non-
supine ODI. Horizontal line at a ratio of 2 is the conventional
definition of postural obstructive sleep apnoea.

using video recording to accurately define posture. The
ratio of supine to non-supine ODI was calculated and
plotted against the all-night ODI. In addition, the prev-
ance of a supine to non-supine ratio of ≥ 2 was calculated
for the two groups, depending on whether the all-night
diagnostic ODI was < 40 or ≥ 40.

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reviewed the final version and take joint responsibility for the content.

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senior author.

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