

Evaluating the Impact of Respiratory Therapists on the Implementation and Effectiveness of CPAP Therapy in Heart Failure Patients: A Comparative Study

Wafa M. Al-Malack¹, Aishah R. Alanazi², Faihan M. Alanazi³, Mohammed B. Alshahrani⁴, Saja A. Almarhoun⁵, Ahmed A. Alanazi⁶

Respiratory Therapist
Health affairs at the ministry of National Guard

Abstract

Background: Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP) therapy is commonly used to manage sleep-disordered breathing in heart failure patients, but adherence remains a challenge. Respiratory therapists (RTs) play a crucial role in optimizing CPAP therapy, yet the impact of their involvement on patient outcomes has not been thoroughly examined.

Objective: This study investigates the effectiveness of CPAP therapy in heart failure patients, focusing on the role of respiratory therapists in implementing and monitoring the therapy.

Methods: A retrospective cohort study was conducted in a large tertiary care hospital, comparing heart failure patients who received CPAP therapy with and without regular RT involvement. Key outcomes included CPAP adherence, changes in heart failure symptoms, clinical outcomes, and patient satisfaction.

Results: The RT Group demonstrated significantly higher CPAP adherence (78.4% vs. 56.7%, $p < 0.001$), greater improvement in NYHA functional class (mean reduction of 0.8 vs. 0.5, $p = 0.002$), and lower hospitalization rates (12% vs. 24%, $p = 0.023$) compared to the Non-RT Group. Patient satisfaction was also higher in the RT Group.

Conclusion: Respiratory therapist involvement significantly enhances CPAP adherence and improves clinical outcomes in heart failure patients. Integrating RTs into the care team is essential for optimizing CPAP therapy and patient care.

Keywords: CPAP therapy, heart failure, respiratory therapists, adherence, clinical outcomes, patient satisfaction

Introduction

Background: Heart failure is a prevalent and chronic condition that affects millions of individuals worldwide, often leading to significant morbidity and mortality. Patients with heart failure frequently experience sleep-disordered breathing (SDB), particularly obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) and central sleep apnea (CSA), which exacerbate the progression of heart failure and negatively impact quality of life (Bitter et al., 2009). Sleep apnea in these patients leads to intermittent hypoxia, increased sympathetic activity, and elevated cardiovascular stress, all of which contribute to worsening heart failure outcomes (Eckert et al., 2007).

CPAP Therapy in Heart Failure: Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP) therapy is a well-established treatment for obstructive sleep apnea and has been shown to improve cardiovascular outcomes in patients with heart failure by reducing apnea events, improving oxygenation, and lowering blood pressure (Kaneko et al., 2003). For patients with central sleep apnea, particularly those with heart failure and reduced ejection fraction, CPAP therapy can stabilize breathing patterns, reduce nocturnal desaturation, and improve heart function (Bradley et al., 2005). Despite its benefits, CPAP therapy is often underutilized or improperly managed in heart failure patients, leading to suboptimal outcomes.

Role of Respiratory Therapists: Respiratory therapists (RTs) play a critical role in the successful implementation and management of CPAP therapy. They are responsible for initial patient assessment, CPAP machine setup, mask fitting, patient education, and ongoing monitoring of therapy adherence and effectiveness (Bollig, 2010). RTs also provide troubleshooting support and make necessary adjustments to therapy settings, which are crucial for maintaining patient compliance and optimizing therapeutic outcomes. Given the complexity of managing CPAP therapy in heart failure patients, the involvement of skilled respiratory therapists can be a determining factor in the success of treatment (Budhiraja et al., 2010).

Study Objective: This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of CPAP therapy in heart failure patients, with a specific focus on the role of respiratory therapists in implementing and monitoring the therapy. By comparing outcomes in patients who received comprehensive RT support with those who did not, the study seeks to evaluate the impact of respiratory therapists on adherence, heart failure symptoms, and overall patient outcomes.

Literature Review

The Intersection of Heart Failure and Sleep-Disordered Breathing: Heart failure (HF) and sleep-disordered breathing (SDB) are closely intertwined, with a high prevalence of both obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) and central sleep apnea (CSA) in patients with heart failure. Studies have shown that up to 50% of heart failure patients suffer from some form of sleep apnea, which significantly worsens their prognosis (Bitter et al., 2009). OSA is characterized by recurrent upper airway obstructions during sleep, leading to intermittent hypoxia, hypercapnia, and arousals, which in turn exacerbate heart failure by increasing sympathetic nervous system activity and contributing to systemic inflammation (Eckert et al., 2007). CSA, on the other hand, involves a temporary cessation of respiratory effort due to instability in the respiratory control center, often seen in patients with heart failure, particularly those with reduced left ventricular ejection fraction (LVEF) (Bradley et al., 2005).

The Role of CPAP Therapy in Heart Failure Management: Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP) therapy is a first-line treatment for OSA and has also been explored as a treatment for CSA, particularly in heart failure patients. CPAP works by providing a constant flow of air through a mask, which helps keep the airway open and prevents apneic episodes. In patients with heart failure and OSA, CPAP therapy has been shown to reduce the apnea-hypopnea index (AHI), improve oxygen saturation, reduce blood pressure, and decrease sympathetic nervous activity, thereby potentially reducing cardiovascular events (Kaneko et al., 2003). Additionally, CPAP therapy in heart failure patients with CSA has demonstrated improvements in left ventricular function and reductions in the incidence of atrial fibrillation (Bradley et al., 2005).

However, despite its benefits, the effectiveness of CPAP therapy in heart failure patients is not uniformly consistent, particularly in those with CSA. Some studies have suggested that CPAP may not be as effective in CSA as in OSA, and there is ongoing debate about the optimal use of CPAP in heart failure patients with different types of sleep apnea (Mansfield et al., 2004). Furthermore, adherence to CPAP therapy remains a significant challenge, with studies reporting adherence rates as low as 50% in some patient populations (Weaver & Grunstein, 2008). The reasons for non-adherence are multifactorial, including discomfort with the CPAP mask, perceived lack of benefit, and difficulty integrating CPAP use into daily routines.

The Role of Respiratory Therapists in CPAP Therapy: Respiratory therapists (RTs) are integral to the successful implementation and management of CPAP therapy, particularly in complex patient populations such as those with heart failure. RTs are responsible for the initial setup of CPAP equipment, including mask fitting and pressure titration, which are critical to ensuring patient comfort and therapeutic efficacy (Bollig, 2010). Moreover, RTs provide essential patient education, helping patients understand the benefits of CPAP therapy and how to overcome common barriers to adherence.

Ongoing monitoring and support from respiratory therapists are also crucial for maintaining long-term adherence to CPAP therapy. RTs play a key role in troubleshooting issues such as mask leaks, skin irritation, and pressure intolerance, which are common reasons for discontinuation of CPAP therapy (Budhiraja et al., 2010). In addition to technical support, RTs often serve as patient advocates, coordinating care with other healthcare providers and ensuring that patients receive comprehensive, multidisciplinary support. Research

suggests that when respiratory therapists are actively involved in CPAP management, patient adherence and outcomes improve significantly (McArdle et al., 1999).

Comparative Studies on CPAP Therapy with and without RT Involvement: While the benefits of respiratory therapist involvement in CPAP therapy are recognized, few studies have directly compared outcomes in patients with and without RT support. One study by McArdle et al. (1999) found that patients who received comprehensive CPAP management, including regular follow-up with respiratory therapists, had significantly higher adherence rates and better clinical outcomes than those who did not receive such support. Another study by Bollig (2010) highlighted the importance of ongoing RT involvement in improving CPAP adherence, particularly in patients with comorbid conditions like heart failure.

Despite these findings, there is still a need for more rigorous, comparative studies that specifically focus on the role of RTs in managing CPAP therapy for heart failure patients. Such studies would help clarify the extent to which RT involvement impacts patient outcomes, including adherence, symptom improvement, and quality of life. Additionally, understanding the specific interventions and strategies employed by RTs that contribute to successful CPAP therapy could inform best practices and lead to the development of standardized protocols. The literature underscores the critical role of CPAP therapy in managing sleep-disordered breathing in heart failure patients, as well as the significant challenges associated with its implementation. Respiratory therapists play a vital role in overcoming these challenges by ensuring proper CPAP setup, providing patient education, and offering ongoing support to maintain adherence. However, more research is needed to explicitly quantify the impact of RT involvement on CPAP outcomes in heart failure patients. This study aims to fill that gap by comparing outcomes in heart failure patients receiving CPAP therapy with and without the active involvement of respiratory therapists, thereby providing valuable insights into the importance of RTs in this clinical context.

Methodology

This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP) therapy in heart failure patients, with a specific focus on the role of respiratory therapists (RTs) in implementing and monitoring the therapy. The study utilized a comparative design to assess patient outcomes with and without active respiratory therapist involvement.

Study Design: The study employed a retrospective cohort design, comparing two groups of heart failure patients who received CPAP therapy. The first group consisted of patients who received comprehensive CPAP management with regular respiratory therapist involvement (RT Group), while the second group included patients who received CPAP therapy without dedicated respiratory therapist support (Non-RT Group). The primary outcomes assessed included CPAP adherence rates, changes in heart failure symptoms, and overall patient outcomes over a 12-month period.

Setting and Participants: The study was conducted in a large tertiary care hospitals with established heart failure and sleep medicine programs. The hospitals were selected for their comprehensive respiratory therapy departments and their use of CPAP therapy in managing sleep-disordered breathing in heart failure patients.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following inclusion criteria:

- Adult patients (≥ 18 years) diagnosed with heart failure (New York Heart Association [NYHA] Class II-IV).
- Documented diagnosis of obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) or central sleep apnea (CSA) requiring CPAP therapy.
- Patients who initiated CPAP therapy between January 2011 and December 2012.
- A minimum follow-up period of 12 months after initiating CPAP therapy.

Exclusion criteria included:

- Patients with severe comorbid conditions (e.g., advanced malignancies) that could independently affect outcomes.
- Patients who discontinued CPAP therapy within the first month due to intolerance or other reasons unrelated to the intervention.

- A total of 200 patients were included in the study, with 100 patients in each group (RT Group and Non-RT Group).

Intervention

In the RT Group, respiratory therapists were actively involved in the management of CPAP therapy. This involvement included:

- **Initial Setup:** Respiratory therapists conducted the initial CPAP setup, including mask fitting and pressure titration, ensuring the equipment was optimally adjusted for each patient.
- **Patient Education:** RTs provided comprehensive education on the use of CPAP, including how to manage common issues such as mask discomfort and air leaks.
- **Ongoing Monitoring:** Patients in the RT Group received regular follow-ups with respiratory therapists, who monitored CPAP adherence, adjusted settings as needed, and provided troubleshooting support for any issues encountered.
- **Patient Support:** RTs offered continuous support through phone calls or in-person visits to address any concerns and reinforce the importance of adherence to CPAP therapy.

In contrast, the Non-RT Group received standard CPAP therapy without dedicated respiratory therapist involvement. These patients were typically managed by their primary care physician or cardiologist, with CPAP setup and follow-up care provided by non-specialized staff or through self-management.

Data Collection

Data were collected retrospectively from electronic health records (EHRs) at the participating hospitals. The following key variables were extracted:

- **CPAP Adherence:** Measured as the percentage of nights CPAP was used for at least 4 hours per night, averaged over the 12-month follow-up period.
- **Heart Failure Symptoms:** Assessed using changes in NYHA functional class and patient-reported outcomes on symptom burden (e.g., dyspnea, fatigue) using a validated heart failure symptom questionnaire.
- **Clinical Outcomes:** Included changes in left ventricular ejection fraction (LVEF), hospitalization rates due to heart failure exacerbations, and all-cause mortality over the 12-month period.
- **Patient Satisfaction:** Assessed using a standardized questionnaire evaluating patient satisfaction with CPAP therapy and the support received.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 26.0). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize baseline characteristics of the two groups. Continuous variables were compared using independent t-tests, while categorical variables were compared using chi-square tests. Multivariate regression analysis was conducted to control for potential confounding variables, including age, gender, baseline heart failure severity, and comorbid conditions.

The primary analysis focused on comparing CPAP adherence rates between the RT and Non-RT groups. Secondary analyses examined changes in heart failure symptoms, clinical outcomes, and patient satisfaction between the two groups. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the ethics committee. Given the retrospective nature of the study, informed consent was waived, but patient confidentiality was strictly maintained by de-identifying all data prior to analysis.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, several strategies were employed:

- **Data Triangulation:** Data were collected from multiple sources (EHRs, patient questionnaires) to enhance the robustness of the results.
- **Inter-Rater Reliability:** A subset of data was reviewed by two independent researchers to ensure consistency in data extraction and coding.
- **Sensitivity Analysis:** Sensitivity analyses were conducted to assess the impact of potential confounders on the primary and secondary outcomes.

This methodology provides a comprehensive framework for assessing the role of respiratory therapists in the management of CPAP therapy for heart failure patients, comparing patient outcomes with and without RT involvement to evaluate the effectiveness of their contributions.

Findings

The study assessed the effectiveness of Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP) therapy in heart failure patients by comparing outcomes between those who received comprehensive respiratory therapist (RT) support and those who did not. The findings are presented below, focusing on CPAP adherence, heart failure symptoms, clinical outcomes, and patient satisfaction.

1. CPAP Adherence: The primary outcome of the study was CPAP adherence, defined as the percentage of nights CPAP was used for at least 4 hours per night over the 12-month follow-up period. The results showed significantly higher adherence rates in the RT Group compared to the Non-RT Group.

Table 1: CPAP Adherence Rates Between RT Group and Non-RT Group

Group	Mean Adherence (%)	Standard Deviation (SD)	p-value
RT Group	78.4	12.5	<0.001
Non-RT Group	56.7	18.3	

As shown in Table 1, the RT Group had a mean adherence rate of 78.4%, significantly higher than the 56.7% observed in the Non-RT Group ($p < 0.001$). This finding suggests that the involvement of respiratory therapists in the management of CPAP therapy is associated with improved adherence.

2. Changes in Heart Failure Symptoms: The study also evaluated changes in heart failure symptoms, specifically using the NYHA functional class and patient-reported symptom burden scores.

Table 2: Changes in NYHA Functional Class and Symptom Burden

Outcome	RT Group (Mean \pm SD)	Non-RT Group (Mean \pm SD)	p-value
NYHA Functional Class Improvement (Δ)	-0.8 \pm 0.4	-0.5 \pm 0.6	0.002
Symptom Burden Score Reduction (Δ)	2.1 \pm 1.0	1.4 \pm 1.2	0.004

Table 2 shows that the RT Group experienced a greater improvement in NYHA functional class (mean reduction of 0.8) compared to the Non-RT Group (mean reduction of 0.5) with a significant difference ($p = 0.002$). Additionally, the RT Group reported a greater reduction in symptom burden scores (mean reduction of 2.1) than the Non-RT Group (mean reduction of 1.4), with a significant difference ($p = 0.004$).

3. Clinical Outcomes: The study assessed changes in left ventricular ejection fraction (LVEF), hospitalization rates due to heart failure exacerbations, and all-cause mortality.

Table 3: Clinical Outcomes Between RT Group and Non-RT Group

Outcome	RT Group (n=100)	Non-RT Group (n=100)	p-value
LVEF Improvement (%)	8.5 ±3.2	5.3 ±4.1	0.001
Hospitalization Rate (%)	12	24	0.023
All-Cause Mortality Rate (%)	8	14	0.145

As presented in Table 3, the RT Group showed a significantly greater improvement in LVEF (mean improvement of 8.5%) compared to the Non-RT Group (mean improvement of 5.3%) ($p = 0.001$). The hospitalization rate was also significantly lower in the RT Group (12%) compared to the Non-RT Group (24%) ($p = 0.023$). Although the all-cause mortality rate was lower in the RT Group (8%) than in the Non-RT Group (14%), the difference was not statistically significant ($p = 0.145$).

4. Patient Satisfaction: Patient satisfaction with CPAP therapy was assessed using a standardized questionnaire. The results indicated higher satisfaction levels in the RT Group.

Table 4: Patient Satisfaction Scores

Satisfaction Measure	RT Group (Mean ± SD)	Non-RT Group (Mean ±SD)	p-value
Overall Satisfaction Score (0-10)	8.6 ±1.2	6.9 ±1.5	<0.001
Ease of Use Score (0-10)	8.1 ±1.3	6.5 ±1.7	<0.001
Support Received Score (0-10)	9.0 ±0.9	7.2 ±1.6	<0.001

Table 4 shows that patients in the RT Group reported significantly higher overall satisfaction with CPAP therapy (mean score of 8.6) compared to the Non-RT Group (mean score of 6.9) ($p < 0.001$). The RT Group also scored higher on ease of use (8.1 vs. 6.5, $p < 0.001$) and support received (9.0 vs. 7.2, $p < 0.001$).

Discussion

This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP) therapy in heart failure patients, focusing on the role of respiratory therapists (RTs) in implementing and monitoring the therapy. The findings highlight the significant impact that respiratory therapists have on patient adherence, heart failure symptoms, clinical outcomes, and patient satisfaction when managing CPAP therapy in this population.

CPAP Adherence: One of the most notable findings of this study was the significantly higher CPAP adherence rates in the RT Group compared to the Non-RT Group. Adherence is a critical factor in the success of CPAP therapy, as consistent use is necessary to achieve the therapeutic benefits of reduced apnea events and improved cardiovascular outcomes (Weaver & Grunstein, 2008). The higher adherence rates in the RT Group suggest that the active involvement of respiratory therapists—through personalized education, mask fitting, and ongoing support—plays a crucial role in overcoming common barriers to CPAP use, such as discomfort and difficulty integrating therapy into daily life (Bollig, 2010). This finding aligns with previous research that emphasizes the importance of healthcare provider support in improving CPAP adherence (Budhiraja et al., 2010).

Improvements in Heart Failure Symptoms: The study also found that patients in the RT Group experienced greater improvements in heart failure symptoms, as evidenced by more significant reductions in NYHA functional class and symptom burden scores. These improvements are likely a direct result of the higher CPAP

adherence rates in the RT Group, which would have led to more consistent reductions in nocturnal hypoxia, decreased sympathetic activity, and improved overall cardiovascular function (Kaneko et al., 2003). The more pronounced symptom relief in the RT Group underscores the importance of respiratory therapists in optimizing CPAP therapy, particularly in patients with complex conditions like heart failure where effective management of sleep-disordered breathing is critical to improving quality of life and reducing disease progression (Eckert et al., 2007).

Clinical Outcomes: The study's clinical outcome measures, including improvements in left ventricular ejection fraction (LVEF) and reduced hospitalization rates, further support the beneficial role of respiratory therapists in managing CPAP therapy. The greater improvement in LVEF observed in the RT Group suggests that consistent CPAP use, facilitated by RT involvement, may contribute to reversing some of the cardiac dysfunction associated with heart failure and sleep-disordered breathing (Bradley et al., 2005). Additionally, the significantly lower hospitalization rates in the RT Group indicate that effective CPAP management can lead to fewer acute heart failure exacerbations, reducing the need for costly and potentially life-threatening hospital admissions. Although the difference in all-cause mortality between the two groups was not statistically significant, the trend towards lower mortality in the RT Group is encouraging and warrants further investigation in larger studies.

Patient Satisfaction: Higher patient satisfaction scores in the RT Group highlight the added value that respiratory therapists bring to the management of CPAP therapy. Patients who received regular RT support reported greater overall satisfaction, ease of use, and perceived support, all of which are important factors in maintaining long-term adherence to therapy (McArdle et al., 1999). The positive patient feedback reinforces the importance of providing comprehensive, personalized care that addresses both the technical and emotional aspects of CPAP therapy. Respiratory therapists, by offering hands-on assistance and empathetic support, can significantly enhance the patient experience and contribute to better therapy outcomes.

Implications for Clinical Practice: The findings of this study have important implications for clinical practice. First, they underscore the critical role of respiratory therapists in managing CPAP therapy for heart failure patients, suggesting that their involvement should be a standard component of care for this population. By providing specialized support, respiratory therapists can help overcome common barriers to CPAP adherence, leading to better clinical outcomes and improved quality of life for patients.

Second, the study highlights the need for healthcare systems to invest in respiratory therapy services, particularly in settings where heart failure and sleep-disordered breathing are prevalent. Ensuring that patients have access to respiratory therapists could reduce hospitalization rates and healthcare costs associated with heart failure exacerbations.

Finally, the study suggests that training and education for respiratory therapists should continue to emphasize the importance of patient-centered care, with a focus on personalized interventions that address individual patient needs. Developing standardized protocols that incorporate best practices in CPAP management, as guided by respiratory therapists, could further improve patient outcomes.

Limitations

While the study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The retrospective design may introduce selection bias, and the study's findings may not be generalizable to all heart failure patients, particularly those in different healthcare settings or with varying degrees of sleep-disordered breathing. Additionally, the study did not explore the long-term sustainability of the observed benefits, which would require follow-up over several years.

Future Research

Future research should focus on prospective studies with larger, more diverse patient populations to confirm these findings and explore the long-term impact of respiratory therapist involvement in CPAP therapy. Additionally, studies examining the specific interventions and strategies used by respiratory therapists that are most effective in improving adherence and outcomes would be valuable in refining clinical practice guidelines.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the involvement of respiratory therapists in the management of CPAP therapy for heart failure patients leads to significantly improved adherence, better heart failure symptoms, enhanced clinical outcomes, and higher patient satisfaction. These findings underscore the critical role of respiratory therapists in optimizing CPAP therapy and highlight the need for their continued integration into the care teams managing heart failure patients with sleep-disordered breathing.

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