Emergency airway management by non-anaesthesia house officers—a comparison of three strategies

V Dörges, H Ocker, V Wenzel, C Sauer, P Schmucker

Abstract

Objectives—The purpose of this study was to determine effects of different airway devices and tidal volumes on lung ventilation and gastric inflation in an unprotected airway.

Methods—Thirty one non-anaesthesia house officers volunteered for the study, and ventilated a bench model simulating an unintubated respiratory arrest patient with bag-valve-facemask, laryngeal mask airway, and combitube using paediatric and adult self-inflating bags.

Results—The paediatric versus adult self-inflating bag resulted with the laryngeal mask airway and combitube in significantly (p<0.001) lower mean (SEM) lung tidal volumes (376 (30) v 653 (47) ml, and 368 (28) v 727 (53) ml, respectively). Gastric inflation was zero with the combitube; and 0 (0) v 8 (3) ml with the laryngeal mask airway with low versus large tidal volumes. The paediatric versus adult self-inflating bag with the bag-valve-facemask resulted in comparable lung tidal volumes (245 (19) v 271 (33) ml; p=NS); but significantly (p<0.001) lower gastric tidal volume (149 (11) v 272 (24) ml).

Conclusions—The paediatric self-inflating bag may be an option to reduce the risk of gastric inflation when using the laryngeal mask airway, and especially, the bag-valve-facemask. Both the laryngeal mask airway and combitube proved to be valid alternatives for the bag-valve-facemask in this experimental model.

Keywords: bag-valve-mask; laryngeal mask airway; combitube; tidal volume; gastric regurgitation

Inhospital cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) response teams may consist of a non-anaesthesiologist because of shortage in experienced anaesthesiologists, or intensive care unit physicians. Also, it is quite common that hospital buildings are spread over a large area or in many different floors, or both. As such, many hospitals may not be able to dispatch experienced anaesthesiologists to remote locations for prolonged periods of time to administer CPR, as this would render a critical care unit or even operation room patients unattended. Thus, the physician in charge of an inhospital CPR attempt may be one of the clinically lesser experienced physicians, but has to carry full responsibility with regard to pharmacological interventions, and especially, airway management. Accordingly, if an airway device can be identified that is easiest to handle for this target group, CPR efforts may benefit. For rescuers who do not have adequate skills in tracheal intubation, the most common means of providing emergency ventilatory support in non-intubated patients during CPR is the bag-valve-facemask system. As bag-valve-facemask ventilation has a number of disadvantages, such as leakage around the facemask, and gastric inflation, the laryngeal mask airway and the combitube may be an alternative to bag-valve-mask ventilation.

Hence, the purpose of this study was to assess lung ventilation and gastric inflation when non-anaesthesia house officers perform ventilation with the bag-valve-facemask system, the laryngeal mask airway, and the combitube in a bench model. Furthermore, it was investigated whether smaller tidal volumes, as recommended by the European Resuscitation Council, but not by the American Heart Association, at the time of this investigation is beneficial in order to reduce the risk of gastric inflation as suggested by some previous bench models simulating a cardiac arrest patient.

Methods

EXPERIMENTAL MODEL

A bench model simulating an unintubated cardiac arrest patient was designed with a new intubation manikin head (Bill I, VBM Medizintechnik, Sulz, Germany), and a lung simulator (LS 800, Dräger, Lübeck, Germany). Lung compliance (50 ml/cm H2O), airway resistance (16 cm H2O/second), and lower oesophageal sphincter pressure (6 cm H2O) were adjusted to simulate respiratory mechanics of a cardiac arrest patient. Respiratory parameters were recorded using the AS 3 compact monitor (Datex Ohmeda, Helsinki, Finland). Subsequently, this setup was connected to a paediatric pneumotachometer to record oesophageal peak pressure, and gastric inflation (fig 1).

EXPERIMENTAL PROTOCOL

Thirty one non-anaesthesia house officers with no previous experience in emergency airway
Airway management by house officers.

Table 1. Number of ventilation failures and number of volunteers inflating the stomach with each airway device.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bag-valve-facemask</th>
<th>Laryngeal mask airway</th>
<th>Combitube</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ventilation failures</td>
<td>2/31</td>
<td>3/31</td>
<td>2/31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stomach inflation</td>
<td>29/29*</td>
<td>7/28†</td>
<td>0/29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data are given in absolute numbers. *p<0.01 versus laryngeal mask airway and combitube. †p<0.01 versus combitube.
Table 2  Tidal lung and tidal oesophageal volume, airway and oesophageal peak pressure for all ventilatory devices and both self inflating bags

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Device</th>
<th>Peak $P_a$ (cm H2O)</th>
<th>Peak $P_{oes}$ (cm H2O)</th>
<th>$V_l$ Lung (ml)</th>
<th>$V_o$ Oesoph (ml)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bag-valve-facemask</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paediatric bag</td>
<td>12 (1)</td>
<td>11 (1)</td>
<td>245 (19)</td>
<td>149 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult bag</td>
<td>14 (1)</td>
<td>12 (1)</td>
<td>271 (33)</td>
<td>272 (24)†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laryngeal mask airway</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paediatric bag</td>
<td>16 (1)*</td>
<td>(0.5)*</td>
<td>368 (28)*</td>
<td>0 (0)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult bag</td>
<td>20 (1)*</td>
<td>(3.5)*</td>
<td>727 (53)*†</td>
<td>8 (3)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combitube</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paediatric bag</td>
<td>20 (1)*†</td>
<td>0*</td>
<td>376 (30)*</td>
<td>0*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult bag</td>
<td>24 (1)*†</td>
<td>0*</td>
<td>653 (47)*†</td>
<td>0*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data are given as mean (SEM). $V_l$ = tidal volume, $P_a$ = airway pressure, $P_{oes}$ = oesophageal pressure. †$p<0.01$ adult bag versus paediatric self inflating bag, *$p<0.01$ versus bag-valve-facemask for all ventilatory devices and both self inflating bags.

inflation. Lung and gastric volumes as well as peak airway and oesophageal pressures showed a significant (p<0.001) difference between the laryngeal mask airway and the bag-valve-facemask. Statistical analysis of the paediatric self inflating bag performance showed the same significant differences as the adult self inflating bag (table 2).

Both laryngeal mask airway and combitube were graded significantly (p<0.001) better than the bag-valve-facemask by the participants in their subjective assessment. In terms of success of airway insertion, quality of seal, and adequacy of ventilation, the instructors ranked the laryngeal mask airway and combitube significantly (p<0.01) better than the bag-valve-facemask as well.

Discussion

When paramedics in the Houston, Texas, Emergency Medical Service were trained to administer advanced airway management, ventilation associated complications were more related to training efforts than to the airway devices themselves. When extrapolating this experience to non-anaesthesia house officers in order to provide in-hospital advanced cardiac life support, two pragmatic solutions may be possible: (1) extensive, continuous training; and (2) standing orders favouring an airway device that is simple to handle with little training. While paramedics, emergency physicians, and anaesthesiologists perform basic and advanced cardiac life support on a daily basis, non-anaesthesia house officers may spend a large portion of their residency in rotations without the need to handle respiratory or cardiac emergencies, or both, on a daily basis, or possibly, even never in their training. Also, training and maintaining advanced airway skills in all or at least some residents may be a cost issue, especially as money allocated to clinical training, they had to carry full responsibility in regards of pharmacological interventions, and especially, emergency airway management during CPR. Accordingly, the chance that a non-anaesthesia physician provides emergency airway management is actually quite possible. These physicians may be a psychiatrist managing a patient with an overdose, an ENT surgeon seeing a patient with severe pharyngeal haemorrhage, an eye physician confronted with an anaphylactic shock, or an orthopaedic surgeon trying to rescue a patient with pulmonary embolus. In that case, if the response time of the cardiac arrest team is anywhere between two and five minutes, initial airway management in that time will have decided whether the stomach is inflated, or if the patient remains hypoxic or hypercarbic, or both, or if the patient is adequately ventilated and oxygenated.

This study suggests that use of the laryngeal mask airway and the combitube was beneficial. The bag-valve-facemask resulted in the most gastric inflation, and insufficient pulmonary tidal volumes. However, small instead of large tidal volumes had a relative advantage, especially when using a bag-valve-facemask. Although the combitube was the only device that safely prevented gastric inflation in our bench model, the associated training commitment with this device possibly may not be guaranteed in non-anaesthesia house officers. Also, the time required for insertion of the combitube was significantly longer than with both bag-valve-facemask and laryngeal mask airway resulting in approximately 30 seconds longer potential hypoxaemia and hypercarbia. Therefore, for physicians with little experience in airway management, our data may tip the scales towards using the laryngeal mask airway because of ease of handling, and speed of insertion.

One approach to achieve proper ventilation may be the choice of the best ventilatory device; another strategy may be a smaller tidal volume, as recently recommended by the European Resuscitation Council in order to minimise gastric inflation during ventilation of an unprotected airway. Thus, the best combination of the right “hardware”, and the right tidal volume may contribute to sufficient oxygenation and ventilation, and may avoid.
gastric inflation. For example, our bag-valve-facemask group clearly demonstrates that small tidal volumes almost cut gastric inflation in half, while maintaining lung volumes. However, when using either ventilation bag with the bag-valve-facemask, only about 50% to 60% of the recommended lung tidal volumes were achieved. Both the laryngeal mask airway and especially, the combitube were the superiior devices in regards of minimizing or even avoiding gastric inflation with either ventilation bag. However, it has to be pointed out that when using small tidal volumes with either ventilatory device in our bench model, lung volumes between about 250 ml to 380 ml were achieved, which is significantly less than the 500 ml recommended by the European Resuscitation Council. This is especially important as either approximately 50% oxygen has to be used when administering tidal lung volumes of < 400 ml, or larger tidal volumes of > 600 ml when room air has to be used to maintain both sufficient oxygenation and ventilation. The new international guidelines of both the ERC and AHA now recommend small tidal volumes of about 500 ml with an Fio2 of >0.4 when ventilating an inanimate chest, reflecting a cardiac arrest patient. Thus, the performance of our volunteers most probably would have been better when a respiratory arrest patient without cardiac arrest and subsequently, with a lower esophageal sphincter pressure of about 20 cm H2O would have been simulated. Furthermore, it is impossible to simulate changing respiratory system compliance such as during CPR, which was shown in a laboratory model. Also, we are unable to report inflation pressures, and at what pressure and tidal volume a leak occurred with each device. Although our manikin is unable to simulate the upper airway of a human perfectly in regards of sealing conditions, we suggest that peak airway pressure values in both the laryngeal mask airway and combitube group indicated an adequate seal.

In conclusion, the paediatric self inflating bag may be an option to reduce the risk of gastric inflation when using the laryngeal mask airway, and especially, the bag-valve-facemask. Both the laryngeal mask airway and combitube proved to be valid alternatives for the bag-valve-facemask in our experimental model.

Contributors
All coauthors designed the study, and collected the data. Volker Dörges and Volker Wenzel edited the first draft of the manuscript, all other coauthors subsequently made critical suggestions to the article. The final draft was read and approved by all coauthors. Volker Dörges will act as guarantor.

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Conflicts of interest: none.

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