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Title:

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Date:

2018-04-01

Citation:

McDonald, C. F. (2018). Exercise desaturation and oxygen therapy in ILD and COPD: Similarities, differences and therapeutic relevance. *Respirology*, 23 (4), pp.350-351.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/resp.13242>.

Persistent Link:

<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/283802>

Editorial Office Notes:

RES-17-820

EDITORIAL

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This is the author manuscript accepted for publication and has undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the [Version of Record](#). Please cite this article as doi: [10.1111/resp.13242](https://doi.org/10.1111/resp.13242)

Exercise desaturation and oxygen therapy in ILD and COPD: similarities, differences and therapeutic relevance

Key words: Oxygen therapy, interstitial lung disease, pulmonary fibrosis

The interstitial lung diseases (ILD) and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) are chronic lung diseases with markedly different aetiologies, incidences, prevalences, pathologies and prognoses. Patients with both ILD and COPD present with increasing breathlessness as a common symptom and exhibit physiologic derangements which may include oxygen desaturation during exercise. In COPD the mechanism of desaturation relates largely to ventilation-perfusion (V/Q) mismatch,¹ whereas, although V/Q mismatch is also an important causative mechanism in ILD, diffusion limitation contributes to a significant degree, as do reductions in mixed venous oxygen content and hypoxic pulmonary vasoconstriction.²

The authors of a retrospective study from Canada in this issue of *Respirology* compared the pattern of oxygen desaturation during a walk test in patients with fibrotic ILD with that of a group of patients with COPD. The aim of the study was to identify predictive factors for exercise desaturation in both groups³. The majority of patients included had undergone a 6 minute walk test (6MWT) during a pulmonary rehabilitation or ILD clinic assessment, while around a quarter of the ILD group had undergone a “walking oximetry test” instead of a 6MWT to assess exercise desaturation when under consideration for ambulatory oxygen. This study of just over 400 patients found that exertional hypoxaemia was more common and more severe in ILD than in COPD, independent of lung function and that a low carbon monoxide diffusing capacity (DLCO) was the predominant predictor of oxygen desaturation in both groups. In the ILD patients, who had mild-moderate disease as determined by

lung function testing, 49% had a nadir arterial oxygen saturation measured by pulse oximetry (SpO₂) $\leq 88\%$ and 75% had a decline in SpO₂ $\geq 4\%$ from baseline. In the COPD group, who had moderately severe disease as reflected in lung function tests, nadir SpO₂ $\leq 88\%$ occurred in just over a quarter of patients, while around 50% had a fall in SpO₂ $\geq 4\%$ from baseline. The link between reduction in DLCO and level of desaturation in COPD has been described previously⁴ and is postulated to relate to degree of emphysema and /or pulmonary hypertension. In both COPD and ILD, exercise-induced hypoxaemia is associated with a poorer prognosis.^{5,6} Some degree of pulmonary hypertension is common in both conditions, occurring in up to 45% of people with advanced idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis (IPF).⁷ Patients with ILD (especially IPF) and pulmonary hypertension have a lower carbon monoxide diffusing capacity, worse exercise tolerance, more exercise-induced oxygen desaturation and a poorer prognosis⁸.

A description of similarities and differences in the exercise responses of patients with these two chronic lung diseases has the potential to contribute to a better understanding of the pathophysiology. Will it result in improved treatment?

Oxygen therapy is prescribed for continuous use in patients with either COPD or ILD who demonstrate persistent severe resting hypoxaemia. The results of studies which demonstrated the life-prolonging benefits of continuous oxygen therapy in patients with COPD and severe resting hypoxaemia were published in the 1980s.^{9,10} It seems extraordinary that, although nearly 35 years has elapsed since publication of the results of these trials, there is still no direct evidence for a similar mortality benefit in patients with severe resting hypoxaemia as a consequence of ILD – chiefly due to an absence of controlled studies. This may be because of the presumed difficulty of recruiting patients to study at such a late stage of their disease, or perhaps because it is thought that

there is lack of equipoise and no clear justification to deny patients potentially life prolonging therapy (as well as potential symptomatic improvement).

There is convincing evidence that prescription of supplemental oxygen in patients with COPD and exertional desaturation in the absence of severe resting hypoxaemia does not improve real-world outcomes.^{11,12} Whether exertional desaturation in patients with ILD without resting hypoxaemia should be treated with supplemental oxygen is unclear. A recent Cochrane meta-analysis of studies of exertional oxygen in patients with IPF found only three low quality studies.¹³ Two of the three showed no benefit of exertional oxygen on exercise capacity or exertional dyspnoea, however it was noted that the oxygen was not titrated to prevent ongoing exertional desaturation. A recent Japanese study found no benefit of supplemental oxygen versus air in a cross-over randomised controlled trial in 20 patients with IPF, however the oxygen flow rate of 4 L/minute via a demand oxygen delivery device was once again inadequate to maintain oxygen saturations >88% in the oxygen group.¹⁴

The authors of the current study remind us that oxygen desaturation with exertion is common in ILD and, as in COPD, is associated with a reduction of DLCO. Mechanisms underlying the desaturation merit research and future studies would ideally include some assessment of pulmonary artery pressure at rest and with exertion, with and without supplemental oxygen. Whether desaturation on exertion in ILD requires treatment with oxygen therapy is uncertain. In a recent systematic review of oxygen therapy for ILD there were no observed effects of oxygen therapy on dyspnoea during exercise in ILD, although exercise capacity was increased. Larger, randomised controlled trials of oxygen therapy in ILD, hopefully providing adequate supplemental oxygen to abolish hypoxaemia

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during exertion, are already underway¹⁶ or soon will be (ACTRN12617000054314): their results are eagerly awaited.

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Disclosure statement

CM reports personal fees outside the submitted work from GSK and Menarini (speaker fees), as well as Pfizer and Novartis (Advisory Board fees).

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