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<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Citation</strong></td>
<td>Hong Kong Medical Journal, 2007, v. 13 n. 5 Suppl 5, p. S15-S17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Issued Date</strong></td>
<td>2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>URL</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10722/57414">http://hdl.handle.net/10722/57414</a></td>
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Predicting the outcome of conservative (non-surgical) voice therapy for adults with laryngeal pathologies associated with hyperfunctional voice use

Key Messages

1. Conservative voice therapy is the first choice of treatment for hyperfunctional voice problems.
2. Not all dysphonic patients will benefit from voice therapy.
3. A set of instrumental and perceptual variables that can be used to predict the outcome of therapy have been developed in this study.

Introduction

Conservative (non-surgical) voice therapy is the typical choice of treatment for adults with laryngeal pathologies associated with hyperfunctional voice use. However, not all patients will benefit from conservative voice therapy as it involves behavioural changes that require cooperation of the patients.1 Owing to the high demand for conservative voice therapy in Hong Kong, selecting appropriate patients could ensure health care resources for this purpose are used cost-effectively.

Objectives

The primary objective of this study was to investigate how well two factors (severity of pathology and perception of activity limitation and/or participation restriction) can predict the outcome of conservative voice therapy. The study aimed to determine whether these two factors could be used as patient selection criteria for conservative voice therapy.

Methods

This project was conducted from November 1998 to December 2001, and consisted of two studies. The first was to develop an assessment tool for quantifying patient’s perception of the impact of voice disorders. The second was to investigate the efficacy of a voice therapy programme and the likelihood of predicting successful outcomes based on: (1) severity of pathology, and (2) perception of activity limitation and/or participation restriction.

Subjects

The first study involved 80 subjects (40 dysphonic with various laryngeal pathologies, 40 with normal voice). The second study involved 159 dysphonic subjects. However, due to attrition factor, only 80 female dysphonic subjects were included in the final analysis.

Study Instruments

Study 1 involved designing a questionnaire and preliminary testing with 45 dysphonic subjects and 10 speech therapists. It was further validated with 80 dysphonic subjects. The second study involved 159 dysphonic subjects. Study 2 involved acoustic, aerodynamic, and perceptual measurements with the questionnaire developed in study 1, to determine how well it could be used to predict the outcome of voice therapy.

Intervention

Study 2 involved an intervention voice programme, consisting of 10 weekly sessions. It entailed standard instructional procedures for all individuals. Subjects were randomly allocated to treatment or no-treatment group and all subjects were assessed before and after the intervention.

Main Outcome Measures

In study 2, acoustic measures, aerodynamic measures, perceptual ratings of
breathiness and roughness, and the Voice Activity and Participation Profile (VAPP) scores were used as the outcome parameters. Selected variables were used in the discriminant function analyses.

### Results

Study 1 developed a validated assessment tool (VAPP) for documenting patient perception of voice activity limitation and participation restriction. The study found that subjects who were dysphonic perceived greater impacts than those with normal voices in the occupational domain, daily communication, social communication, and emotional aspect (Table 1). It also found that activity limitation and participation restriction could be affected separately. Specifically, this dissociation was found in the occupational domain, in which a subject might note limitation in activities but had no choice but to continue participating.

In study 2, a conservative voice therapy programme was developed and shown to be effective in treating patients with hyperfunctional voice problems. Subjects who completed the programme showed significant improvement in jitter %, shimmer %, maximum fundamental frequency, fundamental frequency range (Table 2), all the VAPP scores excepting job domain (Table 3). They also showed
improvement in all three perceptual voice qualities ratings (Table 4), in comparison to subjects who were given no treatment. Furthermore, three predictive variables (Pearson $r$ at autocorrelation peak, mean flow rate for sentence production, noise-to-harmonic ratio and the total VAPP score) were all found to show high discriminative power in predicting changes in severity (perceptual breathiness) after treatment.

**Discussion**

The findings of this study have led to the development of an assessment battery that can be used to reliably predict the outcome of voice therapy. The battery consists of instrumental and perceptual analysis of the vocal pathology and condition, and a questionnaire surveying patients’ perception of disability and handicap caused by the vocal impairment. The assessment battery can be used as a clinical tool to select patients for conservative voice therapy. This tool will improve the accountability and cost-effectiveness of voice therapy.

**Acknowledgements**

This study was supported by the Health Services Research Fund (#821007). The authors thank the patients and normal controls who participated. We also thank the undergraduate students from the Division of Speech and Hearing Sciences who helped recruit patients and analyse data. Special thanks are due to Ms Hoi-yee Kwan who helped in setting up all aspects of the project.

**Reference**