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# High-flow oxygen therapy in tracheostomized patients at high risk of weaning failure

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** High-flow oxygen therapy delivered through nasal cannulae improves oxygenation and decreases work of breathing in critically ill patients. Little is known of the physiological effects of high-flow oxygen therapy applied to the tracheostomy cannula (T-HF). In this study, we compared the effects of T-HF or conventional low-flow oxygen therapy (conventional O<sub>2</sub>) on neuro-ventilatory drive, work of breathing, respiratory rate (RR) and gas exchange, in a mixed population of tracheostomized patients at high risk of weaning failure.

**Methods:** This was a single-center, unblinded, cross-over study on fourteen patients. After disconnection from the ventilator, each patient received two 1-h periods of T-HF (T-HF1 and T-HF2) alternated with 1 h of conventional O<sub>2</sub>. The inspiratory oxygen fraction was titrated to achieve an arterial O<sub>2</sub> saturation target of 94–98% (88–92% in COPD patients). We recorded neuro-ventilatory drive (electrical diaphragmatic activity, EAdi), work of breathing (inspiratory muscular pressure–time product per breath and per minute, PTP<sub>musc/b</sub> and PTP<sub>musc/min</sub>, respectively) respiratory rate and arterial blood gases.

**Results:** The EAdi<sub>peak</sub> remained unchanged (mean ± SD) in the T-HF1, conventional O<sub>2</sub> and T-HF2 study periods (8.8 ± 4.3 μV vs 8.9 ± 4.8 μV vs 9.0 ± 4.1 μV, respectively, *p* = 0.99). Similarly, PTP<sub>musc/b</sub> and PTP<sub>musc/min</sub>, RR and gas exchange remained unchanged.

**Conclusions:** In tracheostomized patients at high risk of weaning failure from mechanical ventilation, T-HF did not improve neuro-ventilatory drive, work of breathing, respiratory rate and gas exchange compared with conventional O<sub>2</sub> after disconnection from the ventilator. The present findings might suggest that physiological effects of high-flow therapy through tracheostomy substantially differ from nasal high flow.

**Keywords:** High-flow oxygen therapy, Tracheostomy, Weaning from mechanical ventilation, Neuro-ventilatory drive, Work of breathing

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## Introduction

High-flow nasal cannula oxygen therapy is the administration of a warmed and humidified air/oxygen mixture at a flow rate between 20 and 60 L/min [1] through nasal cannulae (HFNC). HFNC is increasingly used in several clinical contexts, particularly in de novo hypoxemic respiratory failure [2–5]; post-extubation [6, 7] and in post-cardiothoracic surgery [8]. Compared with conventional oxygen therapy (conventional O<sub>2</sub>), HFNC produces several physiological effects [9], which include: a better matching between the delivered gas flow mixture and patient's spontaneous inspiratory flow; a positive end-expiratory pressure (PEEP) effect (generally between 2 and 8 cm H<sub>2</sub>O [10, 11]) and a "CO<sub>2</sub> wash out" effect from the upper airways [12, 13]. Further, the humidified and warmed gas mixture favors the mucociliary function and reduces upper airway resistance [2, 14]. The synergistic combination of these mechanisms leads to improved oxygenation [2], decrease in neuro-ventilatory drive and work of breathing [15–17].

High-flow oxygen therapy can also be applied to the tracheostomy opening (T-HF) in tracheostomized patients. Since HFNC decreases the risk of re-intubation in patients at risk of extubation failure [6, 7], it is reasonable to hypothesize that T-HF could aid the separation from mechanical ventilation in mechanically ventilated, tracheostomized patients at high risk of weaning failure. However, T-HF is a novel therapy and it is not known whether it replicates the physiological advantages of HFNC.

Our study hypothesis was that T-HF, compared to conventional O<sub>2</sub>, would decrease the neuro-ventilatory drive, work of breathing, respiratory rate and improve gas exchange, in a mixed population of tracheostomized patients at high risk of weaning failure [18].

## Methods

### Study design

This was a single-center, unblinded, cross-over study of ventilated patients via tracheostomy with prolonged weaning from mechanical ventilation. After disconnection from the ventilator, each patient received two 1-h periods of T-HF (T-HF1 and T-HF2) alternated with 1 h of conventional O<sub>2</sub>.

### Patient selection

Patients admitted to the intensive care unit (ICU) of the Bari University Hospital (Italy) between June 2017 and May 2018, requiring mechanical ventilation via tracheostomy, were screened for inclusion in the study. Inclusion criteria were age  $\geq 18$  and a diagnosis of prolonged weaning according to WIND study (i.e., patients not weaned after more than 7 days from the first separation attempt)

[18]. Exclusion criteria were: contraindications to the insertion of an electrical activity of the diaphragm (EAdi) catheter (e.g., upper gastrointestinal surgery, esophageal varices, esophageal trauma) cardiopulmonary instability, concomitant neuro-muscular pathologies and/or known phrenic nerve dysfunction. Furthermore, we excluded patients showing signs of paradoxical abdominal movement or use of accessory inspiratory muscles. The local ethics committee approved the study protocol (Azienda Ospedaliero-Universitaria Policlinico di Bari Ethics Committee, Protocol No.: 55276/C.E. Lug 2016). Patients or next of kin gave their written consent to participate in the study.

Based on our clinical protocol [19], patients were disconnected from the ventilator and allowed to breath unassisted through the tracheostomy cannula if they met the following criteria: (a) resolution or improvement in the condition leading to acute respiratory failure; (b) positive end-expiratory pressure (PEEP) lower than 5 cm H<sub>2</sub>O and an inspiratory oxygen fraction (FiO<sub>2</sub>) lower than 0.5 with a PaO<sub>2</sub>/FiO<sub>2</sub> ratio greater than 150 mm Hg; (c) arterial pH > 7.35; Richmond Agitation-Sedation Scale (RASS) between 0 and -1 [20], on no sedation or on a continuous infusion of dexmedetomidine (0.1–1.4  $\mu\text{g}/\text{kg}/\text{h}$ ); (d) ability to trigger the ventilator as demonstrated by a decrease in pressure airway opening ( $P_{\text{AO}}$ ) > 3–4 cm H<sub>2</sub>O during a brief (5–10 s) end-expiratory occlusion test. Other criteria were hemodynamic stability without vasoactive drugs (excluding a dobutamine and/or dopamine infusion lower than 5  $\mu\text{g}/\text{kg}/\text{min}$  and a 3  $\mu\text{g}/\text{kg}/\text{min}$ , respectively) and normothermia.

Patients were ventilated with a Servo-i ventilator (Maquet, Getinge group Critical Care, Solna, Sweden) equipped with the EAdi software (Maquet, Getinge group Critical Care, Solna, Sweden). The EAdi catheter was positioned based on the corrected nose–earlobe–xyphoid distance formula, and its position was subsequently adjusted using the ventilator EAdi catheter position tool (Servo-i ventilator NAVA software) in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions [21].

### Measurements

Patients were studied in the semi-recumbent position. The EAdi signal was collected from the RS232 port of the ventilator at a sampling rate of 100 Hz (NAVA tracker software, Getinge Critical Care, Solna, Sweden) and stored in a personal computer. The NAVA tracker files were subsequently converted and analyzed using the ICU Lab software package (Klestek Engineering; Bari, Italy).

The inspiratory EAdi peak (EAdi<sub>PEAK</sub>), the integral of the inspiratory EAdi deflection over time (EAdi<sub>PTP</sub>), the slope of the EAdi from the beginning of inspiration to the peak (EAdi<sub>SLOPE</sub>), the respiratory rate (RR) and the

neural inspiratory time ( $T_{i_{NEUR}}$ ) were measured from the EAdi trace [22].

The pressure generated by the inspiratory muscles ( $P_{musc}$ ) was estimated from the EAdi signal and the neuro-muscular efficiency index (NME), through to a method previously validated by Bellani and coworkers [23]. The NME is the ratio between the negative pressure generated by the inspiratory muscles and the corresponding EAdi [17, 24–26] and is therefore expression of the efficiency of the diaphragmatic depolarization (as expressed by the EAdi) to generate a muscular contraction.

Accordingly,  $P_{musc}$  may be estimated through the formula:

$$P_{musc} = EAdi * NME$$

In our study, we obtained the NME by the ratio between the negative pressure in the airway opening ( $P_{AO}$ ) generated by a single inspiratory effort against the occluded airways and the corresponding positive peak in EAdi ( $EAdi_{PEAK}$ ). Briefly, we performed a short (5–10 s) end-expiratory occlusion and recorded the  $P_{AO}$  and EAdi traces that were subsequently digitally recorded and analyzed offline. We analyzed a single inspiratory effort, the first that occurred during the end-expiratory airway occlusion. Of note, this method allows calculating the NME without an esophageal catheter, since the fall in  $P_{AO}$  during a spontaneous inspiratory effort against the occluded airways is, by definition, equal to the corresponding fall in esophageal pressure ( $P_{ES}$ ) [27, 28]. However, the  $P_{AO}$ -based NME overestimates by a factor of 1.25 the  $P_{ES}$ -based NME, and therefore we corrected our  $P_{musc}$  calculation as follows [23]:

$$P_{musc} = EAdi * (NME/1.25)$$

The inspiratory  $P_{musc}$  pressure–time product per breath ( $PTP_{musc/b}$ ) was calculated as the area under the

$P_{musc}$  signal. The inspiratory  $P_{musc}$  pressure–time product per minute ( $PTP_{musc/min}$ ) was calculated as:

$$PTP_{musc/min} = PTP_{musc/b} * RR.$$

The tidal volume (VT) was not measured to avoid any modification in breathing pattern caused by the measurement apparatus.

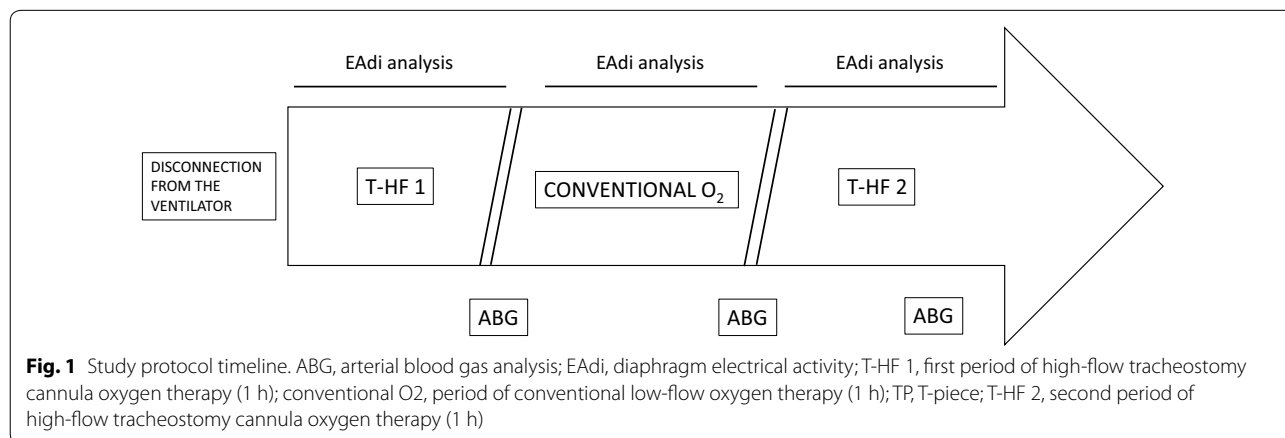
### Study protocol

Before disconnection from the ventilator, each patient underwent a 30-min spontaneous breathing trial (SBT) in pressure support ventilation (PSV), with a pressure support of 5 cm H<sub>2</sub>O and a PEEP of 5 cm H<sub>2</sub>O [29]. The SBT was successful if no signs of distress occurred, defined as: (a) paradoxical abdominal movements or other signs of accessory respiratory muscle fatigue; (b) cardiovascular instability (systolic blood pressure, SBP > 160 or < 90 mmHg—or a 20% change from the pre-SBT values; heart rate, HR > 120 or < 60 beats/min or 20% change from the pre-SBT values; (c) arterial desaturation with  $SaO_2 < 88\%$ ; (d) hypercapnia defined as respiratory acidosis with  $pH < 7.35$  [19]. Patients succeeding the SBT were separated by the ventilator and included in the study.

The NME was calculated during the SBT, 5–10 min before the disconnection from mechanical ventilation, after careful tracheal suctioning in order to improve the quality of the measurement.

Weaning from the ventilator was defined as the ability to breathe spontaneously through the tracheostomy cannula without signs of respiratory distress (see above) and without the need for reconnection to the mechanical ventilator for at least 48 h.

Immediately after disconnection from the ventilator, patients underwent a cross-over protocol with an ON–OFF–ON design, alternating T-HF with conventional O<sub>2</sub> delivered through a T-piece (i.e., T-HF1—conventional O<sub>2</sub> therapy—T-HF2), with each phase lasting for 1 h (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1** Study protocol timeline. ABG, arterial blood gas analysis; EAdi, diaphragm electrical activity; T-HF 1, first period of high-flow tracheostomy cannula oxygen therapy (1 h); conventional O<sub>2</sub>, period of conventional low-flow oxygen therapy (1 h); TP, T-piece; T-HF 2, second period of high-flow tracheostomy cannula oxygen therapy (1 h)

The T-HF was administered through the AIRVO™ 2 system (Fisher and Paykel Healthcare, Auckland, New Zealand) with a specific interface for the tracheostomy tube (OPT870, Fisher and Paykel Healthcare, Auckland, New Zealand). The system allows administration of humidified and warmed gas flow at 10–60 L/min in the adult configuration. The interface (Fig. 2) is composed of a connector (length = 38 mm) equipped with a side stream gas delivery tube (diameter 12 mm). The angle between the axis of the connector and the delivery tube is 60°. The gas flow was set at 50 L/min in all the patients. At the beginning of each T-HF period, the FiO<sub>2</sub> was titrated to achieve an arterial hemoglobin oxygen saturation (SaO<sub>2</sub>) of 94–98% (or 88–92% in patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease). The temperature of the heater–humidifier was set at 37 °C.

Conventional O<sub>2</sub> therapy was administered through a T-piece weaning kit connected to a standard O<sub>2</sub>/air mixer (0–15 L/min). The T-piece gas flow was set to 10 L/min in all the patients. At the beginning of the conventional O<sub>2</sub> period, the FiO<sub>2</sub> was titrated to match the same oxygenation targets of the T-HF periods (see above).

At the end of each study period, arterial blood for gas analysis was obtained. The EAdi trace was digitally

recorded and analyzed for the entire duration of the study period.

### Statistical analysis

The power analysis indicated a sample size of 14 patients taking the EAdi<sub>PEAK</sub> as the main study endpoint. We have hypothesized that the variability explained by the study condition had to be at least 5% of total variability that approximatively corresponds to an expected effect size of 0.25, with a power of 0.8 and a significance level of 0.05. The sample size was determined using the software GPower version 3.1.9.2.

Continuous quantitative variables were summarized as mean ± standard deviation if normally distributed or as median and interquartile range if non-normally distributed. Comparisons were performed with ANOVA for repeated measures or Friedman test as appropriate. A *p* value < 0.05 was considered as statistically significant, except in multiple comparison procedure, when the *p*-value was adjusted. The analyses were carried out with SAS 9.4 for Windows PC.

### Results

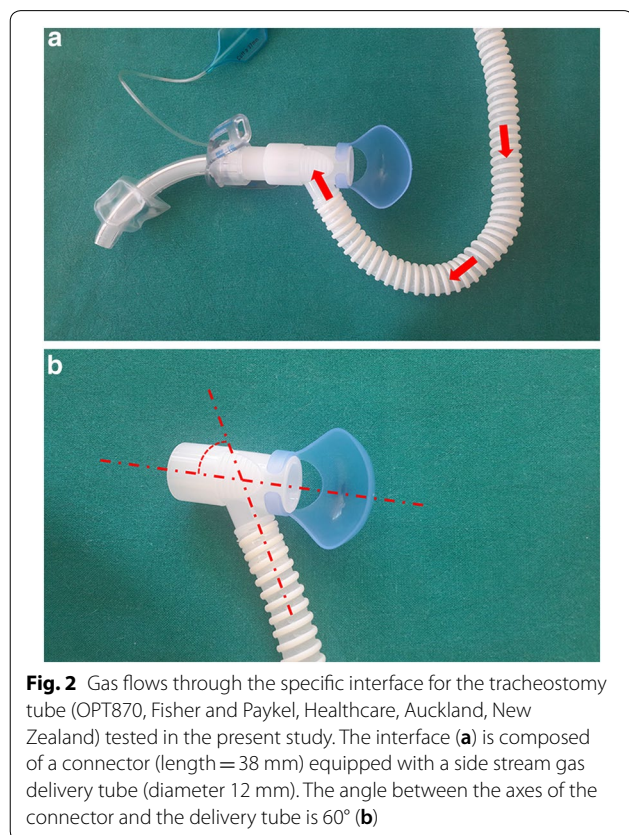
The CONSORT study diagram (Fig. 3) shows that in the study period, 22 out of 38 tracheostomized patients with prolonged weaning from mechanical ventilation at high risk of weaning failure were eligible for the study and 14 were finally enrolled and completed the study protocol. Patients' demographics and clinical characteristics are shown in Table 1.

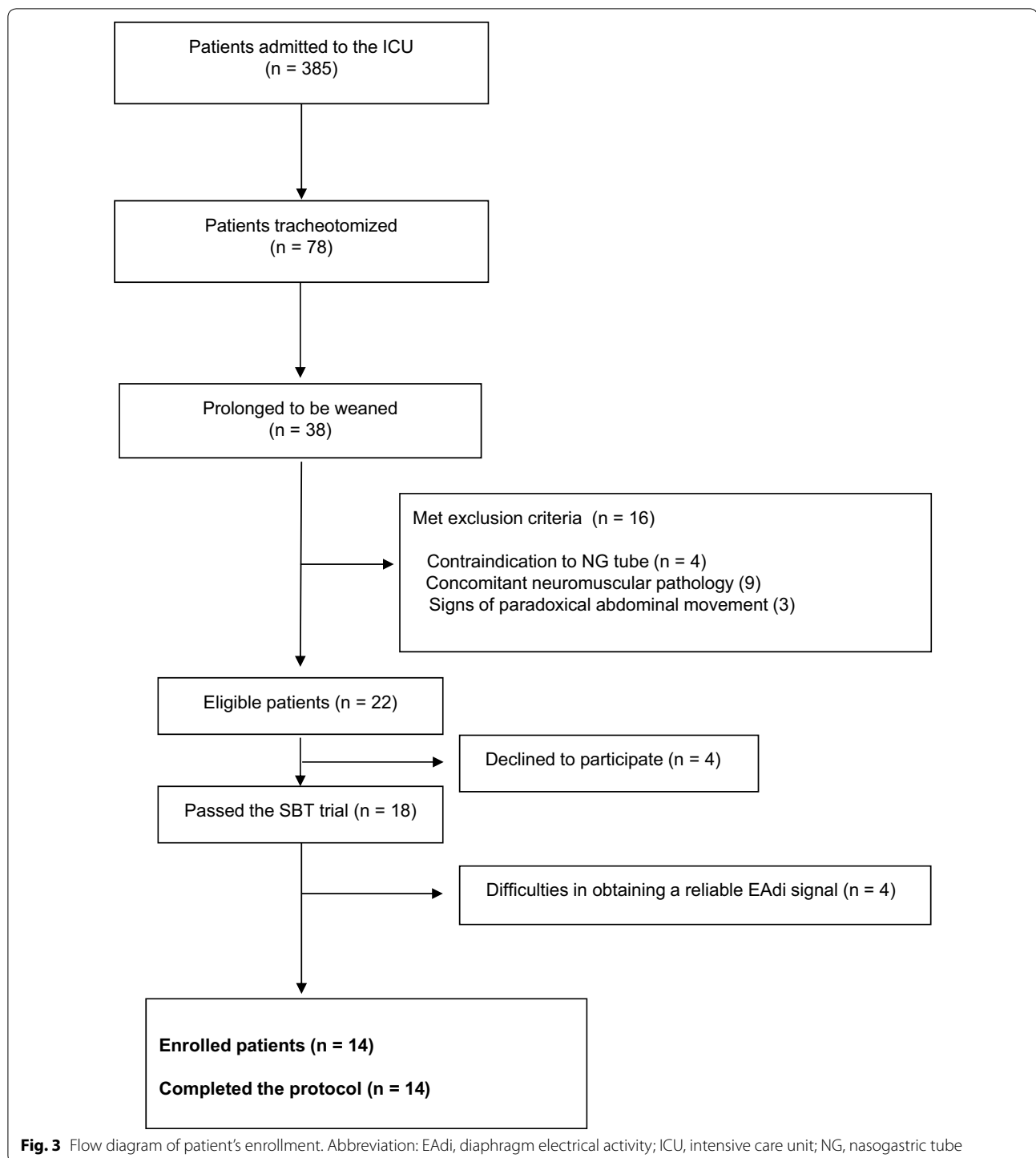
### Breathing pattern and gas exchange

Table 2 shows the breathing pattern and gas exchange parameters. The oxygenation target was achieved with similar FiO<sub>2</sub> levels in the three study steps (0.51 ± 0.1; 0.51 ± 0.12; and 0.51 ± 0.11 in the T-HF1, conventional O<sub>2</sub> and T-HF2 periods, respectively; *p* = NS). The arterial pO<sub>2</sub> was 109 ± 27 mm Hg in the T-HF1 period, 92 ± 17 mm Hg in the conventional O<sub>2</sub> period and 111 ± 28 mm Hg in the T-HF2 period, *p* = 0.09. Arterial PCO<sub>2</sub>, RR and Ti<sub>NEUR</sub> remained similar throughout the study (Table 2).

### Neuro-ventilatory drive and work of breathing

Figure 4 is an experimental record showing the EAdi traces obtained at the end of each of the three experimental conditions, in four representative patients. The neuro-ventilatory drive, as expressed by the EAdi<sub>PEAK</sub>, EAdi<sub>PTP</sub> and EAdi<sub>SLOPE</sub>, remained unchanged in the three experimental periods. The same occurred for





work of breathing, as expressed by  $PTP_{\text{muscle}/b}$  and  $PTP_{\text{muscle}/\text{min}}$  (Table 3). Figure 5 shows the individual changes in  $E\text{Adi}_{\text{PEAK}}$  and work of breathing parameters, in the three experimental conditions.

## Discussion

In this study, we tested the effects of high-flow oxygen therapy through a dedicated tracheostomy interface on gas exchange, neuro-ventilatory drive, respiratory rate and work of breathing in tracheostomized patients at high risk of weaning failure. Our data suggest that



**Table 1 Demographical and clinical characteristics of studied patients**

Patient	Gender	Age	SAPS II (at ICU admission)	SOFA (day of study)	Reason of admission in ICU	Days of MV	Disconnection outcome	ICU length of stay (days)	ICU outcome
1	F	71	40	2	Polytrauma	11	Failure	17	Survivor
2	M	66	41	3	Thoracic trauma	14	Success	18	Survivor
3	F	73	59	4	Acute coronary syndrome	14	Success	20	Survivor
4	M	72	55	3	Post-anoxic coma	25	Failure	55	Non-survivor
5	M	58	29	5	Subarachnoid hemorrhage	11	Success	15	Survivor
6	F	49	27	4	Postoperative respiratory failure (neurosurgery)	25	Failure	45	Non-survivor
7	F	74	44	2	Cardiac failure	15	Failure	25	Non-survivor
8	M	41	30	2	Community-acquired pneumonia	21	Failure	30	Survivor
9	M	71	43	4	COPD exacerbation	16	Failure	28	Survivor
10	M	38	24	5	Polytrauma	12	Failure	28	Survivor
11	M	52	72	2	Septic shock (urinary tract infection)	10	Failure	20	Survivor
12	M	80	56	7	COPD exacerbation	21	Failure	28	Survivor
13	M	57	26	5	Subarachnoid hemorrhage	15	Success	20	Survivor
14	M	48	25	3	Polytrauma	13	Success	18	Survivor

**Table 2 Breathing pattern and gas exchange in different experimental conditions**

	HF-T 1	Conventional O <sub>2</sub>	HF-T 2	<i>p</i>
RR (breaths/min)	19.4 ± 3.9	20.1 ± 4.3	20.4 ± 5.4	0.94
Ti <sub>NEUR</sub> (s)	1.07 ± 0.21	1.03 ± 0.2	1.02 ± 0.24	0.88
pH	7.51 ± 0.04	7.51 ± 0.04	7.52 ± 0.04	0.76
PaCO <sub>2</sub> (mm Hg)	44 ± 9	44 ± 8	43 ± 8	0.93
HCO <sub>3</sub> <sup>-</sup> (mEq/L)	33 ± 4.5	33 ± 4	33 ± 4	0.99
PaO <sub>2</sub> (mm Hg)	109 ± 27	92 ± 17	111 ± 28	0.09
PaO <sub>2</sub> /FiO <sub>2</sub>	219 ± 59	187 ± 50	223 ± 45	0.13

Data are expressed as mean ± standard deviation

HF-T, high-flow tracheotomy cannula oxygen therapy; conventional O<sub>2</sub>, conventional low-flow oxygen therapy through a T-piece; RR, respiratory rate; Ti<sub>NEUR</sub>, neural inspiratory time; PaCO<sub>2</sub>, arterial partial carbon dioxide pressure; PaO<sub>2</sub>, arterial partial oxygen pressure; FiO<sub>2</sub>, inspiratory oxygen fraction

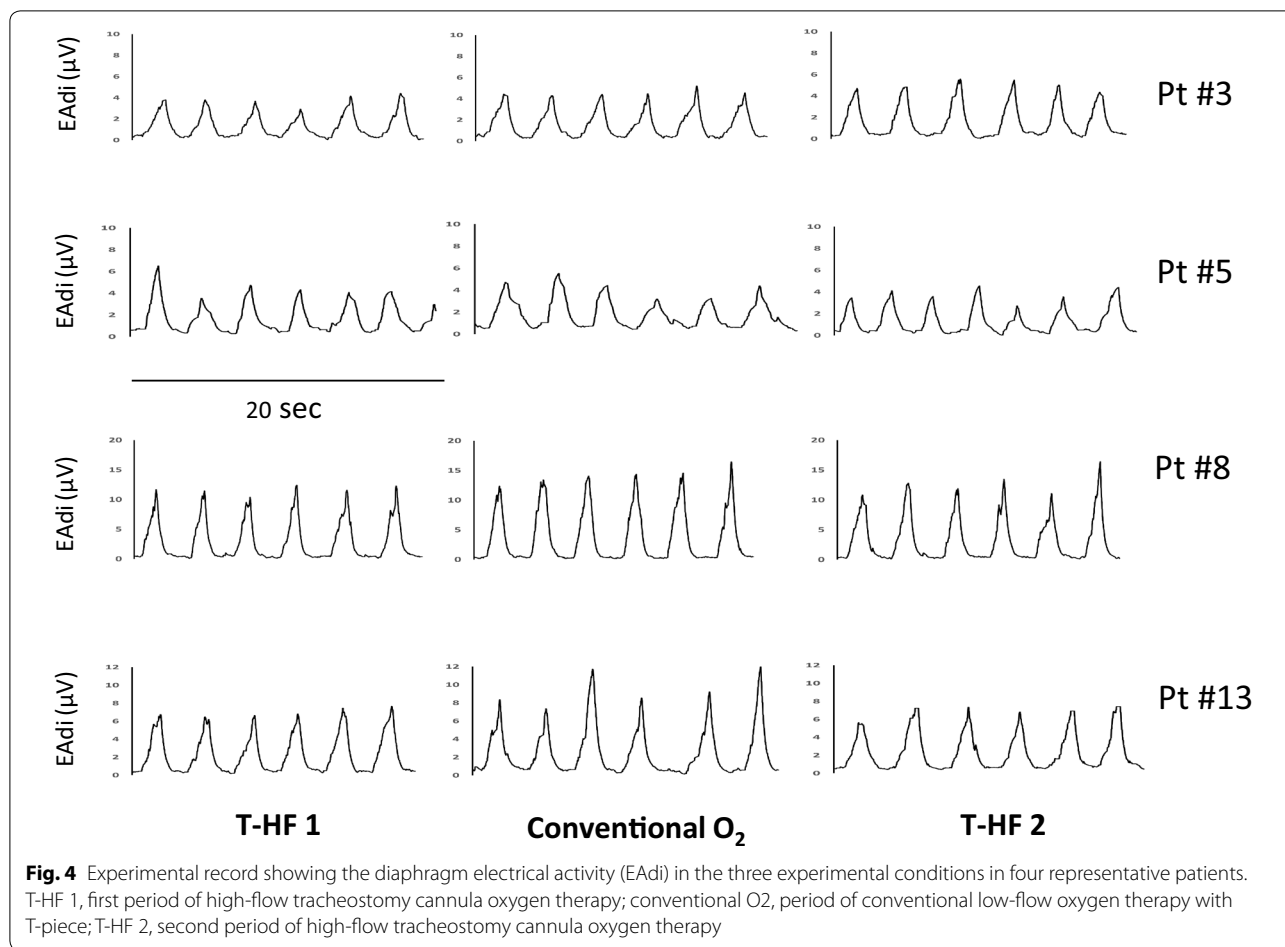
T-HF does not produce the same physiological effects as HFNC on these outcome parameters. Although our study was not designed for a detailed examination of the physiological mechanisms generated by high flow at the tracheal level, we discuss the possible physiological mechanisms that may explain our results.

Recent studies have shown that during HFNC, patients decrease their minute inspiratory volume maintaining stable the PaCO<sub>2</sub> [15–17]. These findings indirectly support the hypothesis that HFNC decreases the neuro-ventilatory drive and work of breathing mainly through its “CO<sub>2</sub> wash out” effect [11, 13, 15–17]. Since we found that T-HF does not impact on the neuro-ventilatory drive and work of breathing, we

speculate that these negative results are explained by the fact that T-HF has negligible “CO<sub>2</sub> wash out effect” compared with HFNC. This can be explained by the fact that HFNC washes out the CO<sub>2</sub> mainly from the nasopharyngeal anatomical dead space [12, 13], whereas the tracheostomy tube bypasses the upper airways. The effect of tracheostomy on dead space has been confirmed by Chadda et al. [30] who show that physiological dead space increases from 156 ± 67 mL before decannulation to 230 ± 82 mL after decannulation.

We were not able to show any impact of T-HF on the PaO<sub>2</sub>/FiO<sub>2</sub> ratio, compared with conventional O<sub>2</sub> (Table 2). We have no data on tracheal pressures and lung volumes, but—given that conventional O<sub>2</sub> and T-HF achieved similar results on a multitude of parameters—it is unlikely that a “PEEP effect” occurred in our patients. Our results are in contrast with those reported in a research letter by Corley et al. [31], showing a slight, but statistically significant improvement in oxygenation with T-HF compared to conventional O<sub>2</sub> in prolonged wean patients. Corley et al. applied T-HF for 15 min, whereas our study periods lasted 1 h and the gas delivery flow rate during conventional O<sub>2</sub> was 15 L/min versus 10 L/min in our study. However, it seems unlikely that these methodological differences could explain the discrepancy between Corley’s results and ours.

The EAdi is a “processed” diaphragmatic electromyography signal recorded through an array of electrode pairs mounted on the wall of a nasogastric feeding tube [32] and is proportional to the intensity of the electrical stimuli directed to the diaphragm [24, 33, 34]. In



**Table 3 Neuro-ventilatory drive and work of breathing parameters**

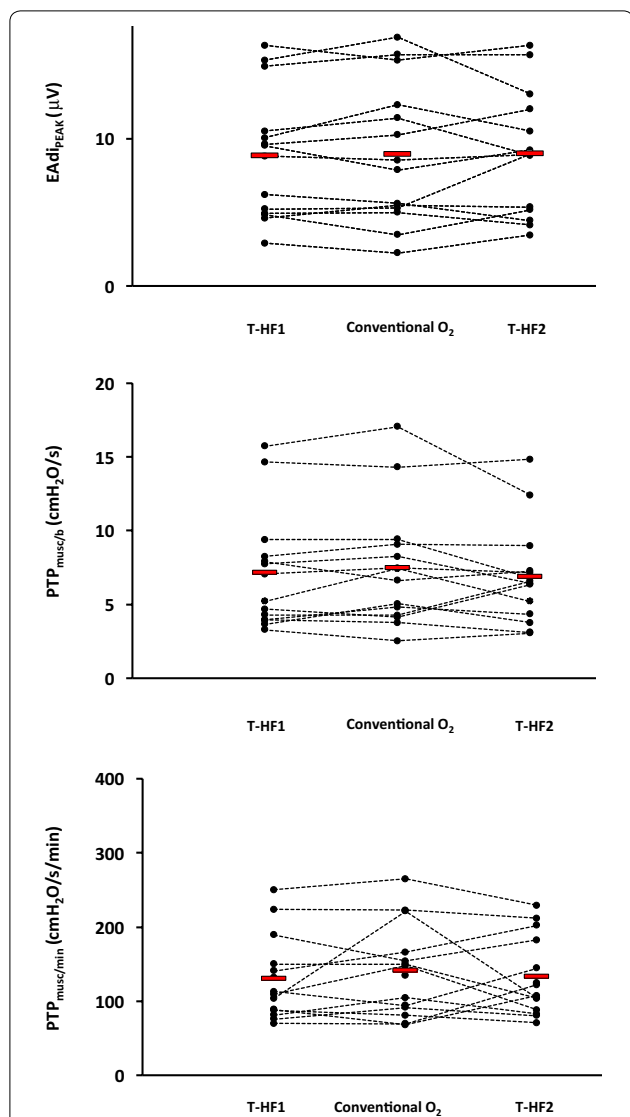
	HF-T 1	Conventional O <sub>2</sub>	HF-T 2 P
EAdi <sub>PEAK</sub> (μV)	8.8 ± 4.3	8.9 ± 4.8	9 ± 4.2 0.99
EAdi <sub>PTP</sub> (μV/s)	7.1 ± 3.6	7.8 ± 4.5	6.9 ± 3.2 0.92
EAdi <sub>SLOPE</sub>	8.5 ± 4.3	8.7 ± 5.2	9.1 ± 4.4 0.95
PTP <sub>musc/b</sub> (cm H <sub>2</sub> O/s)	7.1 ± 3.9	7.4 ± 4.1	6.9 ± 3.4 0.92
PTP <sub>musc/min</sub> (cm H <sub>2</sub> O/s/min)	130 ± 56	140.7 ± 61	132 ± 53 0.86

Data are expressed as mean ± standard deviation if normally distributed or as median and interquartile range if non-normally distributed

HF-T, high-flow tracheotomy cannula oxygen therapy; conventional O<sub>2</sub>, conventional low-flow oxygen therapy through a T-piece; EAdi<sub>PEAK</sub>, diaphragm electrical activity peak; EAdi<sub>PTP</sub>, EAdi deflection inspiratory area; EAdi<sub>SLOPE</sub>, EAdi slope from the beginning of inspiration to EAdi<sub>PEAK</sub>; PTP<sub>musc/br</sub>, inspiratory pressure–time product per breath; PTP<sub>musc/min</sub>, inspiratory pressure–time product per minute

other words, the EAdi is a measure of the discharge rate of phrenic nerves that have been shown to reliably reflect the neuro-ventilatory drive and work of breathing [24, 32–36]. Recently, Bellani and coworkers

[23] demonstrated that EAdi can be used to estimate the instantaneous work of breathing, as we did in our study. Liu and coworkers found that an EAdi<sub>PEAK</sub> lower than 15–20 μV during a spontaneous breathing trial was associated with extubation success [25]. Dres et al. [37] and Barwing et al. [38] obtained similar results. In our study, we found that the EAdi<sub>PEAK</sub> was below 20 μV (Fig. 5) both during the T-HF and the conventional O<sub>2</sub> periods. We speculate that these findings could be explained by the fact that our patients were tracheostomized. Previous studies have shown that the neuro-ventilatory drive is up to 30% lower in tracheostomized patients [30], probably because the tracheostomy decreases the overall airway resistance [39] and the physiological dead space [30]. Furthermore, to our knowledge, data on the normal ranges of neuro-ventilatory drive in tracheostomized patients are scanty. In analogy with EAdi, the PTP<sub>musc/min</sub>, a well-known index of work of breathing, was within its “acceptable” range (i.e., between 50 and 150 cm H<sub>2</sub>O/s/min [40, 41]), in 72%, 65% and 72% of our patients in the T-HF1, conventional O<sub>2</sub> and T-HF2 periods, respectively (Fig. 5).



**Fig. 5** Trend of the neuro-ventilatory drive, as expressed by the diaphragm electrical activity peak  $EAdi_{PEAK}$ , and of work of breathing, as expressed by the inspiratory muscular pressure–time product per breath ( $PTP_{musc/b}$ ) and per minute ( $PTP_{musc/min}$ ). Other abbreviations: T-HF 1, first period of high-flow tracheostomy cannula oxygen therapy; conventional  $O_2$ , period of conventional low-flow oxygen therapy with T-piece; T-HF 2, second period of high-flow tracheostomy cannula oxygen therapy

We must acknowledge some study limitations. *First*, we conducted a non-randomized ON–OFF–ON cross-over study that, for practical reasons, could not be blinded. Furthermore, we were not able to measure several respiratory parameters (VT, EELV, airways pressure) that could have provided us with a more complete interpretation of the treatment effect. However, our study was conducted in spontaneously breathing patients and we sought to avoid any modification in breathing pattern caused by the

measurement apparatus. *Second*, we estimated  $P_{musc}$  based on a method recently validated by Bellani and coworkers [22] and applied in different studies, but we must point out that this method assumes a diaphragm contribution to the overall  $P_{musc}$  of 75%, as occurs in normal conditions [42]. On the other hand, if the contraction of the accessory inspiratory muscles is dominant (as occurs in case of paradoxical abdominal movements) the estimation of  $P_{musc}$  from  $EAdi$  could be biased. However, we excluded from our study patients showing signs of paradoxical abdominal movement and use of accessory inspiratory muscles (see “Methods” section). In addition, the method described by Bellani et al. [23] assumes a linear relationship between  $EAdi$  and  $P_{musc}$  at different lung volumes but other authors have shown a nonlinearity between  $EAdi$  and lung volumes [24]. However, this occurs only in case of intense diaphragmatic contractions [24]. *Fourth*, our physiological study was not designed to test the impact of T-HF on patients’ comfort. Over a prolonged period, however, T-HF could better preserve the mucociliary function compared with conventional  $O_2$  [14], improving the secretion clearance and patient’s comfort. Further studies are needed to test this hypothesis. *Fifth*, we used a fixed high flow rate (50 L/min) but it is possible that, in analogy with HFNC [43], our results would have been different at different flow rates. Further studies are needed to construct a dose–response between T-HF flow rate and physiological effects. On the other hand, a different interface design, for example, with a different flow delivery angle (Fig. 2), could improve the  $CO_2$  clearing from the tracheal space, compared with the interface tested in the present study.

**Conclusions**

In conclusion, in our cohort of tracheostomized patients at high risk of weaning failure, after disconnection from the ventilator T-HF did not affect neuro-ventilatory drive, work of breathing, respiratory rate and gas exchange, compared to conventional  $O_2$ . The present findings might suggest that physiological effects of high-flow therapy through tracheostomy substantially differ from nasal high flow.

**Abbreviations**

COPD: chronic obstructive pulmonary disease; Conventional  $O_2$ : conventional low-flow oxygen therapy;  $EAdi$ : electric activity of the diaphragm;  $FiO_2$ : inspiratory oxygen fraction; HFNC: high-flow nasal cannula oxygen therapy; ICU: intensive care unit; NIV: noninvasive ventilation; NME: neuro-muscular efficiency;  $P_{AO}$ : pressure airway opening; PEEP: positive end-expiratory pressure; PEEPi: intrinsic positive end-expiratory pressure;  $PTP_{musc/b}$ : pressure–time product per breath;  $PTP_{Dmuscmin}$ : pressure–time product per minute; RR: respiratory rate;  $SAO_2$ : arterial hemoglobin oxygen saturation; SBP: systolic blood pressure; SBT: Spontaneous Breathing Trial; T-HF: high-flow tracheostomy oxygen therapy;  $Ti_{NEUR}$ : neural inspiratory time; VT: tidal volume.



### Authors' contributions

SG, TS and SS contributed to design the conception and design of the study. RDm, FDC, RI, FS and TS were responsible for patient screening and enrollment. PT performed statistical analysis. SG, RDm, FS analyzed the data; SG and TS wrote the manuscript. LC, SS, CAV, FSt and FB critically revised the manuscript for important intellectual content. All authors contributed to interpretation of the data. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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### Acknowledgements

None.

### Competing interests

SG has given talks in symposia organized by Getinge Critical Care (Solna Sweden), Estor Critical Care (Mirandola, Italy), Fisher and Paykel (Auckland, New Zealand) and has received compensation for related travel and accommodation fees. He declares no other relationship or activities that could appear to have influenced the submitted work. All the other authors declare: (1) no support from any organization for the submitted work; (2) no financial relationship with any organizations that might have an interest in the submitted work in the previous 3 years; and (3) no other relationship or activities that could appear to have influenced the submitted work.

### Availability of data and materials

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### Consent for publication

Not applicable.

### Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical approval was obtained by the local ethics committee (Azienda Ospedaliero-Universitaria Policlinico di Bari Ethic Committee, Protocol No.: 55276/C.E. Lug 2016). All patients or their relatives provided informed consent to participate.

### Funding

No specific funding was received for this study.

### Publisher's Note

Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Received: 15 October 2018 Accepted: 2 January 2019

Published online: 07 January 2019

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