The Night in the ICU

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How it Started

Taking care of a COVID-19 patient comes with an initial surprise: there is no standard mindset to guide the physician’s work before entering a COVID-19 patient’s room. After some initial hesitation, most physicians have dubious feelings. It is a mix of both relief (“it is just another sick patient, I have treated people before”) and fear (“what should I do next?”).

There were few reports early on in the pandemic. Scattered information from “happy hypoxaemic” patients, coupled with suggestions that early intubation was of key importance, the fear of aerosols, the multiple suggestions that anticoagulation should be done due to an abnormally high number of thrombotic events and even other proposed pharmacological treatments (from hydroxychloroquine to tocilizumab, passing by corticosteroids and other drugs) appeared in discussions, forums and some case reports. They were sometimes demanded by patients and families and even politically propelled. This all contributed to shifting the discussion from keeping standards of care to a search of finding a single treatment that would halt the disease.

As soon as COVID-19 blew up in Brazil in May, I was reallocated to what we call a “routine intensivist” (an intensivist that goes almost every working day to the ICU) to a dedicated 10-bed COVID-19 ICU in my former teaching hospital (Hospital das Clínicas from the University of São Paulo). This large teaching hospital, built more than 50 years ago, became a dedicated COVID-19 hospital. Many ICU beds were created, peaking close to 300. I was privileged to work under few resource constraints, but eventual drug shortages and irregular availability of some specific supports (such as continuous renal replacement therapy [RRT] and high-flow nasal catheters [HFNC]) were expected. Concerns were beyond patient care, including staff protection and wellbeing, and resource management.

How is my Unit Doing?

A constant concern of the intensivist is whether they are doing the right thing for their patients. In a scenario where ICU admissions are many and mortality is high, the impeding sense of despair is inevitable. Under normal circumstances, measuring and optimising ICU care is a long-term process, with trends in standardised mortality ratio and standardised resource use being tracked and adjustments being made (Salluh and Soares 2014; Rothen 2017; Zampieri 2020). This is impossible in a pandemic, let alone a pandemic of an unknown disease in a new ICU that has just opened, with a multidisciplinary team that never worked together before.

Traditional markers of performance seemed misleading. Crude mortality is not a useful parameter, specially if you are receiving patients late or only the sickest ones (which are eventually granted an ICU bed). Waiting for standardised mortality ratio and standardised resource use to become available was not feasible, because these measures take time and because they rely on well calibrated illness severity scores (which were unavailable; it was not to be expected that traditional illness severity scores, such as SAPS 3, would perform well for a single disease) (Rewa 2018). Need for readmission is also problematic, because pressure for beds was constant and because you are discharging patients to a ward staff that is as inexperienced with COVID-19 as you. Length of mechanical ventilation is also cumbersome, because few data were available. Although this data should all be measured, they should not (and were not) interpreted as direct performance measurements in this situation.

Rational Implementation

The key to delivering best care was, once again, to develop and implement a routine that guaranteed a minimum evidence-based acceptable care. This is the key point: “minimum.” It became clear that while we had few to no evidence on how to manage the COVID-19 disease, we had a good deal of evidence on how to manage patients with multiple organ failure, including respiratory failure. That became our focus in the new unit. Simply do what we know as supported by evidence and rest assured that, on average, we would be doing the best for most patients.

We adopted the “zentensivist” approach with open arms (Siuba 2020). What a graceful surprise we had when we realised that we could do a lot by focusing in doing well what we knew and by being more patient and less reactive. Summarising previous evidence as you prepare for an unknown disease can be relieving for the staff and allows one to drift attention away for elusive therapies or magic bullets. A brief summary of what was known before the pandemic, caveats on applying evidence on COVID-19 considering resource...
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<th>Concern</th>
<th>COVID-19 Imposed Challenges</th>
<th>Approach</th>
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<tr>
<td>Family meetings and definition of directives</td>
<td>Families were unable to visit patient. Interface with staff also compromised.</td>
<td>Daily calls. Video conferences whenever possible. Document all family contacts in charts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intubation timing</td>
<td>Concern on aerolisation with NIV and CNAF early in the pandemic.</td>
<td>Use of NIV/CNAF under controlled scenarios (isolated room) (Iwashyna 2020) Intubation guided by ROX Index (Roca 2019) or by respiratory effort (tolerate hypoxaemia if no other organ failure).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ventilator setting</td>
<td>Low and high elastance profiles expected to occur, with unknown ventilatory management differences at the time.</td>
<td>Mechanical ventilation set as for any other ARDS patient regardless of elastance (plateau pressure below 30 cmH₂O, tidal volume of 4-6 mL/kg), PEEP guided by PEEP table.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sedation</td>
<td>Expected long duration of mechanical ventilation, with higher incidence of critical illness polineuromyopathy. Occasional shortage of drugs (including fentanyl).</td>
<td>Daily awakening followed by spontaneous breathing trial as soon as possible. Limited use of neuro-muscular blockade outside first 48-72 hours.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ventilator weaning</td>
<td>Unknown “optimal” extubation failure rate. Expected that patients would have difficult weaning. Absence of evidence of when it is safe to release tidal volume in these patients (and ARDS lato senso).</td>
<td>Encouraging spontaneous breathing trials regardless of PO₂/FiO₂ ratio. Allowed extubation even with low (below 120) PO₂/FiO₂ ratio if no delirium and/or instability For patients with delirium and hypoxaemia, discuss tracheostomy.</td>
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<td>Pharmacological treatment (not corticosteroids)</td>
<td>Many drugs proposed to be effective, with unknown clinical benefit (lopinavir/ritonavir, nitazoxanide, hydroxychloroquine, azithromycin...).</td>
<td>Use limited to research protocols. Not used as routine care.</td>
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<td>Corticosteroids</td>
<td>Concerns on prolonged viral shedding and risk of secondary infections in this population. Evidence on ARDS suggested benefit of dexamethasone for ARDS patients. Older evidence suggested benefit of corticosteroids for prolonged ARDS.</td>
<td>Use of dexamethasone assuming COVID-19 should not be different than other ARDS causes. Adopted RECOVERY dosage as soon as press release available (RECOVERY 2020).</td>
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<td>Anticoagulation</td>
<td>Potential benefit suggested as many patients presented with active thrombosis. Unclear net benefit.</td>
<td>Use of prophylactic heparin for all patients if no contraindication. Monitor of deep vein thrombosis with sequential ultrasound. Use of heparin for patients with signs of disseminated intravascular coagulation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Considerations</td>
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<td>Stress ulcer prophylaxis</td>
<td>Concern of higher risk of bleeding for patients under mechanical ventilation, receiving corticosteroids.</td>
<td>No routine use of proton-pump inhibitors as per SUP-ICU trial (Krag 2018).</td>
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<td>Secondary infection management</td>
<td>The expected long ICU stay would pose these patients to higher risk of infection.</td>
<td>Adoption of a wait-and-see strategy (cultures and vigilance) for patients with signs of infection that are not unstable. Short courses of antibiotics. Removal of all unnecessary devices as soon as possible.</td>
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<td>Renal replacement therapy</td>
<td>Incidence of acute kidney injury seemed high in critically ill COVID patients. Machine availability to initiate renal replacement therapy could be a limiting factor.</td>
<td>Use of renal replacement therapy only after failure of medical management of AKI (no early dialysis) Family meetings before initiation of RRT whenever possible.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO)</td>
<td>Unclear if COVID-19 would be a disease that would benefit from ECMO (as apparently happened with H1N1) or not. ECMO may improve ARDS outcomes in some scenarios, but there were concerns on COVID-19, specially regarding circuit patency.</td>
<td>ECMO as a rescue therapy seldom considered. Contact and referral of ECMO team for selected cases.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tackling adverse events</td>
<td>Expectation that patients would require prolonged ICU stay would pose them to cumulative risk for adverse events, such as device removal, infections from unnecessary devices, airway management complications, etc.</td>
<td>Debriefing after all adverse events to identify bottlenecks and opportunities to avoid future events. Use of fish-bone strategy. Avoid “blaming” culture.</td>
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<td>Drug shortage</td>
<td>Due to high demand, it was expected that some shortage of critical drugs (sedation, neuromuscular blockades, antibiotics) could occur.</td>
<td>Discuss with pharmaceutics and establish a priori replacement for some critical drugs, e.g. (drug → replacement): 1. Propofol → Midazolam 2. Fentanyl → Morphine 3. Cisatracurium → Rocuronium → Pancuronium 4. Ceftriaxone → Cefuroxime → Amoxicillin</td>
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<td>Staff burnout</td>
<td>Carrying for severely ill patients for a prolonged period, under pressure, afraid of getting sick and underpaid seems the perfect recipe for burnout.</td>
<td>We knew it would occur. We also knew we could do little to nothing about the very roots of burnout.</td>
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<td>Data collection and research</td>
<td>Hard to allocate staff for data collection and research in this scenario.</td>
<td>Allocate a data collector regardless of the scenario to avoid flying blind. Use data to encourage staff. Use research as an opportunity to improve care and increase the sense of value inside the unit.</td>
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Table 1. Adapting evidence and measuring processes of care during COVID-19.

AKI - acute kidney injury; ARDS - Acute respiratory distress syndrome; CNAF - high-flow nasal cannula; ECMO - Extracorporeal Membrane Oxygenation; NIV - non-invasive ventilation; PEEP - positive end-expiratory pressure; ROX Index - ratio of pulse oximetry/FiO₂.
optimisation and the proposed solution are shown in Table 1.

Improving patient safety also required us to establish a “tracking” algorithm for unexpected events. Tracing back the roots of a problem following a structured approach (like a fish bone diagram) can be helpful to find opportunities to perform simple interventions and, also equally important, to understand that not all adverse events can be completely solved solely by changing ICU behaviour. You have to accept that you cannot change everything and that some structural problems will prevail despite the best efforts. One example is shown in Figure 1, based on a real case experienced during the pandemic. Barotrauma may occur after intubation and it is tempting to attribute it to operator inexperience, improper airway management, poor sedation/blockade, exces-

Figure 1. A fish-bone example of a fast-track approach to tackling an adverse event. Many contributors to the event can be approached and improved (such as lack of a clear protocol for unexpected admissions, need for a backup ventilator, among others). Other factors are structural and go beyond ICU walls and, therefore, may not be easily tackled. Some problems also have no immediate solution, such as lack of difficult airway training for all. This can be solved partially by arranging working scale in a way an airway proficient physician is always in-house.

When “off the grid” interventions seemed successful, one should temper their hardihood and calmly explain to staff that this was an exception, not a rule, and avoid creating new directions of protocol based on previous successful cases. Debriefing successful cases should be done with the same scrutiny as debriefing unsuccessful ones.

Final Remarks

The goal of any ICU remains the same, whether during a pandemic or not: produce survivors with the best quality of life possible at the fastest speed achievable by applying the most current evidence while using the smallest amount of resources. Sticking to evidence-based practices and reducing a hyper-reactive state allows one to remain focused on what is known and beneficial and may be able to improve both outcomes and resource utilisation.

Key Points

- COVID-19 has resulted in significant challenges for doctors in intensive care.
- The search for a cure has shifted the discussion from maintaining standards of care to a search of finding a single treatment.
- Under normal circumstances, measuring and optimising ICU care is a long-term process but this becomes impossible during a pandemic.
- While we had few to no evidence on how to manage the COVID-19 disease, we had a good deal of evidence on how to manage patients with multiple organ failure, including respiratory failure.
- Improving patient safety also required us to establish a “tracking” algorithm for unexpected events.

References


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