Efficiency of the Lung Flute for sputum induction in patients with presumed pulmonary tuberculosis

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Abstract

Introduction: High quality sputum helps increase the sensitivity of the diagnosis of pulmonary tuberculosis.

Objectives: To evaluate the efficiency of the acoustic device (Lung Flute; LF) in sputum induction compared with the conventional method, hypertonic saline inhalation (HSI).

Methods: In this crossover study, patients with presumed pulmonary tuberculosis submitted 3 consecutive sputa: the first sputum without induction and the second and third ones using LF and HSI. We compared the efficiency of the 2 induction methods.

Results: Sixty-four participants were eligible. Thirty-five (54.6%) patients had negative smears on the first sputum without induction. Among those patients, 25.7% and 22.9% patients were smear-positive after using LF and HSI, respectively (P = .001). The positive conversion rate was not significantly different between the methods. The first samples without induction yielded 65.7% positive cultures, whereas 71.4% and 77.1% of the samples from LF and HSI were positive, respectively (P = .284). Similar results were observed in the nucleic acid amplification test [no induction (60.0%), LF (72.0%) and HSI (60.0%); P = .341]. In 29 smear-positive patients on the first sputum without induction, we observed no significant increase in smear grade, culture yield and nucleic acid amplification test positivity with either method. LF tended to induce fewer adverse events; desaturation (3.1% vs 11.1%; P = .082) and throat pain (1.5% vs 9.5%; P = .057). LF showed significantly fewer total adverse events (15.8% vs 34.9%; P = .023).

Conclusions: Our study showed LF had similar sputum induction efficiency to HSI with relatively fewer complications.

KEYWORDS cough, pulmonary infection, symptom, tuberculosis

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Early diagnosis of pulmonary TB is essential for the effective treatment of TB and infection control. Sputum smear microscopy is still the only method in many settings for the diagnosis of active TB. This method requires high-quality sputum samples for high-sensitivity detection of acid-fast bacilli (AFB). One study regarding sputum sample quality among pulmonary TB patients suggested that purulent or blood-tinged sputum showed significant positive correlation with AFB smear positivity compared to mucoid or saliva specimens. However, some patients, including small children, elderly people and people living with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) generally expectorate paucibacillary or no sputum. In such cases, hypertonic saline inhalation (HSI) is currently recommended to induce sputum. This method requires the use of an ultrasonic nebuliser and aseptic hypertonic saline solution, which are not readily available in resource-limited settings. Thus, there is need for a simple sputum induction method that requires no electricity or complicated device.

The Lung Flute (LF; Medical Acoustics, Buffalo, New York) is an acoustic device invented in 2002 for promoting sputum expectoration. It is small, light and consists only of a mouthpiece with an internal reed attached to a 36.8-cm-long rectangular hardened plastic tube (Figure 1). LF requires no other device or external power source for operation. When the patient exhales gently through the mouthpiece, LF generates 18–22 Hz of acoustic waves and 110–115 dB output with a pressure of 2.5 cm H2O. These waves travel downward along the tracheobronchial tree and vibrate the secretions and sputum. As a result, LF can increase sputum clearance and ease expectoration. In 2012, the World Health Organization recognised LF as an innovative medical device for diagnosing pulmonary TB, particularly in resource-limited settings. The US Food and Drug Administration approved LF as a sputum induction device for diagnostic purposes in 2006.

Fujita et al. showed that LF is able to induce sputum expectoration efficiently in patients with suspected pulmonary TB who are unable to expectorate sputum immediately. However, thus far, no controlled study has compared the sputum induction efficiency between LF and HSI. The objective of this study was to evaluate the sputum induction efficiency of LF in comparison with HSI for the bacteriological diagnosis of the patients with presumed pulmonary TB.

2 | PARTICIPANTS AND METHODS

2.1 | Participants

This was a multicentre randomised non-blinded crossover study conducted at 6 TB hospitals in Japan. The patients who were highly suspected of harbouring active pulmonary TB, and who could not easily expectorate sputum, were screened between 1 December 2010 and 31 November 2013. Patients were asked to expectorate sputum forcefully. If the first sample obtained was less than 2+ positive in smear microscopy, they were eligible for the study. If the first sputum smear microscopy of the participants was positive, patients began anti-TB treatment immediately. The exclusion criteria were as follows: a 3+ sputum AFB smear microscopy result at enrolment, asthma, haemoptysis, chronic hypoxemia (SpO2 < 90% in ambient air), easy expectoration of spontaneous sputum and no understanding of sputum induction procedures. Additionally, patients who were treated with anti-TB drugs for more than 5 days were excluded to avoid the TB treatment effect on laboratory examination results.

2.2 | Sputum induction procedures

The enrolled participants were randomly assigned to 2 groups, A and B, after expectorating their first sputum sample without induction. Participants in group A submitted their second sputum sample using LF and on the following day submitted their third sample using HSI; the order was reversed for the participants in group B. To avoid any residual effect of the previous sputum induction, we collected the 2 sputum samples at least 24 hours apart. LF was used according to the manufacturer’s instructions, and the procedure was performed in the morning. Briefly, after a deep inhalation, patients exhaled twice into the mouthpiece of the LF. Then, they rested for 2 or more normal breaths and repeated the process 20 times under the care and observation of the medical staff. The HSI with 3% hypertonic saline was performed using an ultrasonic humidifier for 10 minutes. Within 3 hours of performing either sputum induction, the participants expectorated sputum into a sterile cup.

2.3 | Laboratory procedures

Sputum samples were digested and decontaminated using the standard N-acetyl-L-cysteine-2% NaOH decontamination method. After neutralisation with phosphate buffer (PB, pH 6.8), samples were centrifuged at 3000 g for 15 minutes at 4°C. After centrifugation, the supernatant was discarded, and the sediment was re-suspended in 1 ml of PB. The AFB smear examination was performed using auramine O fluorescence microscopy using 50 μl of the suspension. We utilised...
500 μl out of each suspension for the culture using the mycobacteria growth indicator tube (MGIT; Becton Dickinson, Franklin Lakes, New Jersey). In the positive culture, Mycobacterium tuberculosis (MTB) bacilli were identified by lateral flow immunoprecipitation (Capilia TB; TAUNS, Izunokuni-shi Japan). Mycobacterial DNA was extracted from 200 μl of the suspension using an automatic system (Magtration System 12GC PLUS, Precision Science System, Chiba, Tokyo) according to the manufacturer’s instructions. The extracted DNA samples were stored at −80°C until nucleic acid amplification. Quantitative nucleic acid amplification was performed by real-time polymerase chain reaction (PCR) using the QuantStudio 12K Flex Real-Time PCR system (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, California), according to the method previously reported.5

2.4 | Clinical data and adverse events

Using a standardised questionnaire, data about the basic characteristics of the participants, including their age, sex, body mass index and chest radiograph findings (the presence of lung cavitation and the extent of the disease) were collected. We monitored the SpO2 of the participants during the sputum induction. Any adverse events of sputum induction, including throat discomfort, throat pain, dyspnoea, wheezing, severe cough, numbness, tremor and nausea, as well as the number of participants whose SpO2 decreased more than 3% during or after the sputum induction, were recorded.

2.5 | Statistical analysis

Fisher’s exact test was used to compare the categorical data between groups and methods. Cochran’s Q test was used to compare the results of binary data among more than 3 paired groups. McNemar’s test was used to compare the results of binary data among 2 paired groups. The Kruskal–Wallis test was used to compare the sputum AFB smear positivity grade and time to positivity (in days) of the samples without induction with those using LF and HSI. We used the unpaired Student’s t-test to compare 2 consecutive variables that followed a normal distribution. To compare 2 consecutive variables that followed a non-normal distribution, we used the Mann-Whitney U test. A difference was regarded as statistically significant when \( P < .05 \). STATA version 12.1 (StacCorp, College Station, Texas) was used for statistical analysis.

2.6 | Ethical consideration

The institutional review boards of all 6 participating hospitals approved this study. All eligible participants provided written informed consent before enrolment.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Participants

Although 67 participants were enrolled in total, 1 withdrew consent during the early phase of TB treatment. One participant in each group was excluded from the analysis because their culture results records were incomplete. Then, a total of 64 subjects with presumed to be suffering from TB, 32 in group A and 32 in group B, were finally included in the analysis (Figure 2).

The mean ± standard deviation (SD) age of participants was 58 ± 17 years. Of the 64 participants, 22 (34.3%) were female. The mean body mass index was 20 ± 3 kg/m². On chest radiograph, 28 (43.7%) participants presented lung cavitation (s); of these, 7 (10.9%) presented extensive involvement of over 50% of the lung field. There was no significant difference in the basic characteristics or chest radiograph findings between the 2 groups [A (n = 32) and B (n = 32); Table 1]; nor was there any significant difference in the smear positivity distribution between the groups on the first sample (Figure 3A,B) (\( P = .883 \)). All of 64 patients successfully expectorated the sputa within 3 hours after using LF and HSI. Among the 64 patients, 35 had AFB-negative smears while 29 had AFB-positive smears in their first samples (Figure 3C).
3.2 | Diagnostic efficiency of LF and HSI

Among the 64 participants, no significant difference was observed in liquid culture positivity (79.6% [95% confidence interval (95% CI): 67.7–88.7] in the first sputum sample, 82.8% [95% CI: 71.3–91.0] in the sputum sample with LF and 85.9% [95% CI: 74.9–93.3] in sputum sample with HSI; \( P = .440 \), median time to detection [11.0 days (95% CI: 10.0–14.7)] of the first sputum sample [13.0 days (95% CI: 12.0–14.0)] in the sputa with LF and 12.5 days (95% CI: 10.5–14.0) in those with HSI; \( P = .437 \) and PCR positivity between the first sputum samples without induction [77.7% (95% CI: 64.4–87.9)] and those obtained using LF [79.6% (95% CI: 66.4–89.3)] and HSI [74.0% (95% CI: 60.3–85.0); \( P = .600 \)].

In total, the first sputum sample of 35 patients was smear-negative for AFB. Among these, statistically significant AFB smear conversions (from negative to positive) were determined in both LF and HSI (\( P = .003 \), Cochran’s \( Q \) test). The number of patients with smear conversion was 9 [25.7% (95% CI: 12.4–43.2), \( P = .001 \)] for LF and 8 [22.8% (95% CI: 10.4–40.1), \( P = .001 \)] for HSI (Figure 4). No significant difference was observed in the smear positive conversion rate between LF and HSI (\( P = .738 \), McNemar’s test). The liquid culture positivity tended to be higher in the sputa induced by LF [71.4% (95% CI: 53.6–85.3)] and HSI [77.1% (95% CI: 59.8–89.5)] than in the sputa of the first samples [65.7% (95% CI: 47.7–80.8)] (\( P = .284 \)) (Table 2). The median time to detection also tended to be shorter with LF [14.0 days (95% CI: 13.0–18.7)] and HSI [14.0 days (95% CI: 11.0–19.6)] compared with the first samples in this subgroup [17.0 days (95% CI: 12.0–20.5)] (\( P = .798 \)) (Table 2). The sputum samples of 10 patients among 35 patients with smear-negative results were not prepared for nucleic acid amplification because their storage condition was inappropriate. Therefore, PCR was performed on 25 patients among those with smear-negative results. PCR positivity tended to be higher in the samples obtained with LF [72.0% (95% CI: 50.0–87.9)], compared with those obtained with HSI [60.0% (95% CI: 38.6–78.8)] and those without sputum induction [60.0% (95% CI: 38.6–78.8)] (\( P = .341 \)) (Table 2).

In the remaining 29 first sputum smear-positive patients out of 64 participants, no significant increase of smear positivity was observed by either LF or HSI (\( P = .418 \), Cochran’s \( Q \) test). No significant difference was observed in

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TABLE 1 Comparison of basic characteristics and chest radiograph findings in Groups A and B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group A (n = 32)</th>
<th>Group B (n = 32)</th>
<th>( P ) value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (mean ± SD)( a )</td>
<td>61 ± 18</td>
<td>56 ± 17</td>
<td>.323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (%)( b )</td>
<td>12 (37.5)</td>
<td>10 (31.2)</td>
<td>.793</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI (kg/m(^2))( a )</td>
<td>20 ± 3</td>
<td>20 ± 2</td>
<td>.743</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chest X-ray findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group A (n = 32)</th>
<th>Group B (n = 32)</th>
<th>( P ) value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cavity formation (%)( b )</td>
<td>13 (40.6)</td>
<td>15 (46.8)</td>
<td>.801</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extensive lesions (%)( b )</td>
<td>3 (9.3)</td>
<td>4 (12.5)</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No description (%)( b )</td>
<td>1 (3.1)</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviation: BMI, body mass index; SD, standard deviation.
\( a \)An unpaired \( t \)-test was used to compare parametric data.
\( b \)Fisher’s exact test was used to compare categorical data. Data are shown as mean ± SD or the number with its corresponding percentage.

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FIGURE 3 Acid-fast bacilli (AFB) smear positivity in spontaneously expectorated sputum. A, AFB smear positivity in group A (n = 32). B, AFB smear positivity in group B (n = 32). *The Mann-Whitney \( U \) test was used to compare the distribution of sputum smear positivity between groups A and B. C, Overall sputum acid-fast bacilli smear positivity (n = 64). Abbreviations: AFB, acid-fast bacilli
3.3 | Adverse events with LF and HSI

We were able to obtain the information of adverse events from 63 out of the 64 total patients because the adverse event data of 1 patient were not recorded for an unknown reason. Thirty-two adverse events were recorded. LF tended to result in less throat discomfort and throat pain ($P = .248$ and $P = .057$, respectively) (Table 3). The proportion of cases in which SpO$_2$ decreased over 3% after the induction tended to be lower with LF (3.17% vs 11.1%, $P = .082$). The total number of adverse events was significantly lower in LF (10 events) than in HSI (22 events) ($P = .023$, Table 3).

4 | DISCUSSION

This study compared the performance of 2 sputum induction methods, LF and HSI. Our findings indicated that LF and

| Table 2 | Liquid culture yield, time to detection and PCR positive yield of the first sputum (no induction) of smear-negative and smear-positive patients |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Spontaneously expectorated sputum smear-negative cases (n = 35) | | | |
| | Culture positivity | SE (n = 35) | LF (n = 35) | HSI (n = 35) | *P value |
| | N (%) | | | | |
| | 23 (65.7) | 25 (71.4) | 27 (77.1) | .284 |
| | Median time to detection days (95% CI) | SE (n = 21)$^a$ | LF (n = 23)$^a$ | HSI (n = 24)$^a$ | **P value |
| | | 17.0 (12.0–20.5) | 14.0 (13.0–18.7) | 14.0 (11.0–19.6) | .798 |
| | PCR positivity | SE (n = 25)$^b$ | LF (n = 25)$^b$ | HSI (n = 25)$^b$ | *P value |
| | N (%) | | | | |
| | 15 (60.0) | 18 (72.0) | 15 (60.0) | .341 |
| Spontaneously expectorated sputum smear-positive cases (n = 29) | | | |
| | Culture positivity | SE (n = 29) | LF (n = 29) | HSI (n = 29) | *P value |
| | N (%) | | | | |
| | 29 (100.0) | 27 (93.1) | 28 (96.5) | .418 |
| | Median time to detection days (95% CI) | SE (n = 26)$^a$ | LF (n = 25)$^a$ | HSI (n = 26)$^a$ | **P value |
| | | 8.5 (6.0–11.0) | 12.0 (8.0–13.8) | 10.5 (8.45–13.5) | .124 |
| | PCR positivity | SE (n = 29)$^b$ | LF (n = 29)$^b$ | HSI (n = 29)$^b$ | *P value |
| | N (%) | | | | |
| | 27 (93.1) | 25 (86.2) | 19 (65.5) | .548 |

Abbreviations: HSI, hypotonic saline inhalation; LF, Lung Flute; PCR, polymerase chain reaction; SE, spontaneous expectoration; 95% CI, 95% confidence interval. Data are presented as number with the corresponding percentage and median (95% CI).

*Cochran’s Q test.

**Kruskal–Wallis test were used for statistical analysis.

$^a$Number of available cases for time to detection.

$^b$Number of available polymerase chain reaction (PCR) samples.
HSI contributed to the conversion of smear results from patients presumed of harbouring active pulmonary TB and whose first sample was AFB smear negative. We observed no statistically significant difference with regard to liquid culture positivity, time to detection, or positive PCR rate between LF and HSI. Therefore, our results demonstrated that both LF and HSI are similarly capable of inducing high-quality sputum samples. Hensler et al. first reported the feasibility and utility of HSI for obtaining sputum samples of adequate quality from patients with suspected pulmonary TB.

A limitation of our study is the small sample size, which precluded any conclusions about the statistical non-inferiority of LF compared with HSI in terms of sputum induction capacity. Another limitation was that the determination of the eligibility of participants who felt no immediate urge to expectorate sputum depended on their subjective statements. However, the induction process was normally introduced when the patient reported no immediate urge to expectorate sputum. Thus, the criterion was reasonably reliable in our estimation.

The findings in this study indicated that the LF method might generally be user-friendly and preferable above HSI. Usually, a disposable mouthpiece is used with HSI to prevent cross-contamination, and more attention should be paid to the possibility of contamination via other non-disposable parts of the ultrasonic nebuliser. In contrast, LF was designed for individual use and can, therefore, be kept free of cross-contamination. Moreover, because LF requires no external power source and is easily portable, it could serve as a practical method even for the patients living in remote areas with a limited power supply. Thus, we consider that LF could be a potential replacement of HSI.

**5 | CONCLUSIONS**

LF was useful for the induction of high-quality sputum to diagnose active pulmonary TB, had a similar efficacy to HSI and generally resulted in less adverse events. Although further studies will be required for a full performance evaluation of the LF, this device could be used as a sputum induction tool.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

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**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors have explicitly stated that there are no conflicts of interest in connection with this article.

**AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

All authors contributed to the design of the study and performed data collection. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

*Performed the statistical analysis: Sakashita*
Wrote the manuscript: Sakashita
Interpretation of results: Sakashita, Fujita, Mitarai
Drafted the final manuscript: Sakashita, Fujita, Mitarai

ETHICS
The institutional review boards of all 6 participating hospitals approved this study. This study was registered with University hospital Medical Information Network (UMIN) Clinical Trials Registry (CTR) on December 8, 2010, at Tokyo, Japan. The clinical trial registration number is UMIN000004676.

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