Comparison of Scope Classifications for Predicting the Need for Airway Intervention in Acute Supraglottitis

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Abstract

Background Acute supraglottitis (AS) can cause airway obstruction, sometimes necessitating airway intervention. Some scope classifications were developed to predict the need for airway intervention in patients with AS; however, the most suitable classification for predicting the need for airway intervention remains unclear.

Objective This study was performed to validate and compare the usefulness of three scope classifications (Katori’s, Tanaka’s, and Ovnat-Tamir’s classifications) for predicting the need for airway intervention in patients with AS.

Materials and Methods We recruited 75 patients (44 males and 31 females aged 20–94 years) with AS who visited Kurashiki Central Hospital between January 2015 and September 2019. The areas under the receiver operating characteristic curves (AUCs) of the scope classifications for predicting the need for airway intervention were measured.

Results Of the 75 patients, airway intervention was needed in 23 patients. The AUC was 0.818 (95% confidence interval [CI]: 0.715–0.922) for Katori’s classification, 0.803 (95% CI: 0.699–0.907) for Tanaka’s classification, and 0.814 (95% CI: 0.705–0.922) for Ovnat-Tamir’s classification.

Conclusion Although all three classifications appeared to be useful, the AUC tended to be the highest for Katori’s classification.

Introduction

Acute supraglottitis (AS) is characterized by inflammation of the epiglottis and may be caused by bacterial, viral, or fungal pathogens.1–3 AS has typically been reported as a disease of children in Western countries, but its incidence in childhood has declined over the past decade since the introduction of Haemophilus influenzae type B vaccination. Adult cases of AS have recently attracted increasing attention.4,5 AS can cause sudden life-threatening airway obstruction, but the prognosis is favorable in cases with adequate airway management.

The focus of AS treatment is maintenance of a patent airway, and several classification systems have been developed to determine the indications for airway intervention (e.g., intubation and tracheostomy). Friedman et al classified AS severity according to the severity of the symptoms,6 and their classification system was used to determine the need for airway intervention.6,7 Recently, laryngeal endoscopy, which provides direct visualization of swelling of the epiglottis, has been widely adopted and is commonly used in AS patients. In 2005, Katori et al developed a new classification for AS patients.
based on the results of laryngeal endoscopy (Katori’s “scope classification”); they reported that a scope-based classification system would be more useful than one based on the symptoms to predict the need for airway intervention. In 2015, Tanaka et al and Ovnat-Tamir et al proposed new scope classifications for AS patients (Tanaka’s classification and Ovnat-Tamir’s classification).

To our knowledge, few studies have sought to validate the diagnostic value of Katori’s classification. In addition, it is unclear whether the scope classification is adequate to predict the need for airway intervention in AS patients. This study was performed to validate and compare the diagnostic value of these scope classification systems for predicting the need for airway intervention in adult patients with AS.

**Methods**

**Study Design and Setting**

We conducted a single-center, retrospective validation study in Kurashiki Central Hospital from January 1, 2015 to September 30, 2019. The study was approved by the institutional review board of Kurashiki Central Hospital, and was conducted and reported in accordance with the STARD principles (Standards for Reporting of Diagnostic Accuracy Studies). We included AS patients aged 20 years or older who were treated at our hospital during the study period. Potentially eligible patients were identified using code J051 of the 10th revision of the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 10 (ICD-10). We confirmed that patients met the inclusion criteria through a chart review of electronic medical records. Patients in whom AS was accompanied by deep neck infection were excluded.

**Airway Management**

In our hospital, the decision for airway intervention is made by the attending otolaryngologist (board certified by the Oto-Rhino-Laryngological Society of Japan).

**Outcome Measures**

The primary outcome was the diagnostic value of scope classification systems for predicting the need for airway intervention, including tracheal intubation, tracheostomy, and cricothyrotomy. We extracted data on patient age, gender, symptoms on presentation (sore throat, dysphagia, odynophagia, drooling, fever, voice change, and dyspnea), comorbidities (laryngeal cyst, diabetes mellitus, smoking), and Friedman grade from the medical records. In Friedman grade, respiratory status represented by respiratory complaints and vital signs was classified from I to IV (Table 1).

Two otolaryngologists (Takashi Fujitawara and Machi Nonomura) evaluated each patient using the scope classification systems of Katori, Tanaka, and Ovnat-Tamir. Disagreements were resolved by discussion with a third author (M.M.). In Katori’s classification, swelling of the epiglottis was classified from I to III; the presence of arytenoid swelling was also evaluated (Table 2). In Tanaka’s classification, swelling of the epiglottis was graded from 1 to 3 and arytenoid swelling was assigned a score of 1 or 2 (Table 3). In Ovnat-Tamir’s classification, the severity of swelling in three subsites, that is, the epiglottis, the aryepiglottic folds and arytenoids, and the rima glottidis, was graded from 0 to 3 (Table 4).

**Statistical Analysis**

We compared the baseline characteristics of patients with and without airway intervention using the Fisher’s exact test for dichotomous data and Student’s t-test for continuous data. The prognostic capability of the each scope classification system for predicting the need for airway intervention was evaluated by plotting a receiver operating characteristic (ROC) curve and calculating the area under the ROC curve (AUC) and the 95% confidence interval (95% CI). When conducting ROC analysis, we defined the ordinal order of Katori’s classification as the following: IA, IB, IIA, IIB, IIIA, and IIIB. All statistical analyses were performed using Stata SE version 15.0 (Stata Corp., College Station, Texas, United States).

**Results**

**Patient Characteristics**

During the study period, 75 cases of AS were identified. Airway intervention was performed in 30.7% of the patients (23/75). The characteristics and symptoms of the enrolled patients are shown in Table 5. Of the patients with airway intervention, 11 (47.8%) underwent intubation and 12 (52.2%) underwent tracheostomy.

**Diagnostic Value of Each Scope Classification**

Fig. 1 shows the ROC curves for each scope classification system. The ROC curves of all of the classification systems were relatively symmetrical and similar to each other. The AUC value was 0.818 (95% CI: 0.715–0.922) for Katori’s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Friedman grade</th>
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<tr>
<td>Respiratory complaint</td>
<td>Sign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Subjective complaints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Mild respiratory distress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Severe respiratory distress</td>
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Note: The severity of supraglottitis is given by respiratory status in the following order: I, II, III, and IV.
The sensitivity, specificity, positive predictive value (PPV), and negative predictive value (NPV) of Katori’s classification are shown in Table 6.

**Discussion**

In this study, we calculated the diagnostic value of three scope classification systems for predicting the requirement...
for airway intervention in AS patients. All of the classification systems showed moderate accuracy, with AUC values of around 0.8.

Katori et al were the first to propose a scope classification system for AS; their system evaluates swelling of the epiglottis and arytenoid separately (e.g., IA, IIA, IIIB). Katori’s classification focuses mainly on the epiglottis, and only indicates the presence/absence of arytenoid edema. The two new classification systems, of Tanaka et al and Ovnat-Tamir et al, assess swelling of the arytenoid and aryepiglottic edema in detail, and generate a total score for swelling in the larynx. Tanaka et al did not compare their classification system with those of Katori et al in terms of diagnostic value, while Ovnat-Tamir et al reported that classification 5 in their system is equivalent to grade II of Katori’s classification.10 Published data indicated 100.0% (81.0%–100.0%) sensitivity and 61.8% (range: 55.9–67.4%) specificity for Katori’s classification, and 65.4% (range: 44.3–82.8%) sensitivity and 81.9% (range: 77.0–86.2%) specificity for Ovnat-Tamir’s classification, although the AUCs were not calculated.10

In this study, we calculated the AUCs of the scope classification systems of Katori et al, Tanaka et al, and Ovnat-Tamir et al, and showed that there were no differences between them. We also calculated the sensitivity, specificity, PPV, and NPV of Katori’s classification. However, this study had some limitations. First, the indications for airway intervention would differ among hospitals, so the sensitivity, specificity, PPV, and NPV values determined here (–Table 6) cannot be generalized, although the AUCs could be applicable to other institutions. The decision to perform airway intervention is informed by the level of clinical expertise, patients’ preferences, and other circumstances. Among previous reports, the rates of airway intervention in AS patients varied from 0 to 30%,7,8,12–15 Otolaryngologists are not always on hand at our hospital, and it is difficult to conduct tracheostomy immediately when AS patients develop airway obstruction. Indeed, 75% of AS patients with Katori IIIB grade received airway intervention in our hospital, compared with 30.8% in Katori’s hospital.8 Second, the attending physician makes the decision to perform for airway intervention based not only on scope evaluation, but also on the patients’ symptoms. Some studies have suggested a correlation between airway intervention and patient characteristics, including body mass index, comorbidities, and comorbid epiglottic cysts.14–16 In this study, the baseline characteristics (age, gender, symptoms, and comorbidities) between the conservative treatment and airway intervention groups were not balanced (–Table 5), and we cannot rule out an influence of these factors on the results. Finally, the physicians in our hospital may have read articles discussing previous scope classification systems,8–10 which may have affected their decision-making process regarding airway intervention in patients with AS.

In our study, there was no difference among these three classifications. Therefore, Katori’s classification, which is the first and common scope classification, is likely to be suitable for a standard method for predicting the need for airway intervention in AS.
Conclusion

We validated and compared the utility of three scope classifications (Katori’s, Tanaka’s, and Ovnat-Tamir’s classification) for predicting the need for airway intervention in AS. Although all three classifications were similar, the AUC tended to be highest in Katori’s classification.

Funding

This work was not supported by any grant or funding.

Conflict of Interest

None declared.

Acknowledgments

We wish to thank Dr. Takashi Fujiwara for advice on study design and writing and Dr. Chisato Miyakoshi and Dr. Hironobu Tokumasu for supervising statistical methods.

References