Lorenzi-Filho, G.; Rodrigues Genta, P.; Drager, L.F.
Sleep apnea in focus
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Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) is characterized by repetitive episodic of partial or complete upper airway obstruction during sleep. The immediate or primary consequences of OSA during sleep and include cyclic asphyxia (i.e., decreases in arterial oxygen + increases in arterial CO₂), generation of excessive negative intrathoracic pressure against the occluded airways and fragmented sleep. The daytime symptoms that may accompany OSA are multiple and include excessive daytime somnolence, tiredness, loss of quality of life and loss of memory. OSA may trigger a cascade of intermediate mechanisms that are potentially harmful to the cardiovascular and metabolic system, and include sympathetic overactivity, systemic inflammation, alterations in blood pressure control, insulin resistance, endothelial dysfunction and atherosclerosis. OSA may trigger or contribute to several diseases, including hypertension, diabetes and cardiac arrhythmias. All these intermediate mechanisms may help to explain the increased mortality with OSA that can be reverted with the treatment with continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP).

The prevalence of OSA in the general population varies according to the disease criteria and technology used to detect respiratory events. One recent epidemiologic study in the city of São Paulo, Brazil, found that OSA syndrome according to current guidelines (i.e., apnea hypopnea index –AHI > 5 events/h plus symptoms or AHI > 15 events/h) was 32.8%. Despite the high sensitivity but a low specificity of the Berlin questionnaire, resistant hypertension, and metabolic syndrome were found in 30 out of 508 patients that witnessed apneas, daytime tiredness and the presence of questions organized in 3 categories regarding sleep apnea symptoms. According to current guidelines (i.e., apnea hypopnea index –AHI > 5 events/h plus symptoms or AHI > 15 events/h) was 32.8%. 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treated with CPAP, representing therefore 5.9% of the population. The reasons for such findings were not clear, particularly because compliance to CPAP therapy was good, and the authors were not able to find correlations between the rise in blood pressure and any variable such as the severity of sleep apnea. One possibility is that the authors made the option to focus on a subgroup of patients that presented a raise in BP. This phenomenon is known as regression to the mean, and is related to the fact that any variable that oscillates over time will present subgroups of patients that will oscillate to one direction, while others will present oscillations in the opposite direction. It is possible therefore that in the subgroup of patients reported, CPAP treatment was coincidental and not related to the rise in blood pressure. It is also possible that the authors would have seen a significant fall in blood pressure after CPAP treatment if they had included all 508 patients treated with CPAP. This approach would reconcile the findings of Loureiro et al. with the literature that has consistently shown a fall in blood pressure after the treatment of OSA with CPAP. On the other hand, this approach would still not answer the question of why a small proportion presents a paradoxical blood pressure response to CPAP therapy. Another possibility is that paradoxical BP responses after CPAP may be modulated by genetic factors, in a similar way to what has been reported with anti-hypertensive drugs. Finally, another possibility is that in that 27 out of 30 patients were treated with automatic CPAP. At least one study showed that in contrast to fixed CPAP, automatic CPAP was not able to decrease blood pressure nor markers of sympathetic activity in patients with OSA. While, it is possible only to speculate why the paradoxical response occurred, this article sheds light on what is known as individualized medicine, that focuses on differences rather than similarities between patients. In conclusion, this issue of Portuguese Journal of Pulmonology contributes to the discussion of significant aspects of OSA screening and complications. Moreover, it calls our attention to the importance of recognizing and treating patients with OSA.

G. Lorenzi-Filho**, P. Rodrigues Genta*, L.F. Drager*

*Laboratorio do Sono, Disciplina de Pneumologia
Instituto do Coração (InCor), Hospital das Clínicas da Faculdade de Medicina da Universidade de São Paulo,

References

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