Oxygen Consumption: Another Key Component in Predicting Ventilator Weaning Success

To the Editor:
I read with great interest the article by Bellani et al.1 and praise their important work in the field of weaning from mechanical ventilation. More than anything, I question how the authors formed the hypothesis that oxygen consumption (VO₂) increases more in patients unable to sustain decreasing ventilatory assistance. In a landmark article by Jubran et al.,2 weaning failure was associated with increased oxygen extraction and decreased oxygen delivery. In the same article, the measured VO₂ increased in both the success and failure from weaning groups, with a lower increase in the success group. In contrast, Zakynthinos et al.”3 demonstrated that patients who cannot be weaned have one of two hemodynamic and oxygen use profiles. (1) Those who fail without increasing VO₂ demonstrate increased oxygen extraction and decreased oxygen delivery. (2) In those who fail and increase their VO₂, the increase mainly occurs secondary to increased oxygen extraction. Direct measures of mixed venous oxygen saturation are increased in the first group and decreased in the second group, supporting their findings. Given the complex physiologic nature of respiratory weaning and weaning failure, it is widely believed that failure to wean occurs secondary to decreased oxygen delivery and increased oxygen extraction. Given the proposal of 1870 by Fick,4 a decrease in cardiac output in combination with an increase in the arteriovenous oxygen content difference would yield a relatively stable VO₂. Combining these data with those of Bellani et al.,1 it is clear that the weaning process is complex and highly variable between patients. Overall, this work supports previous studies demonstrating that there are patients who fail weaning in the absence of increased VO₂.

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(Accepted for publication January 19, 2011.)
In conclusion, the authors produced an impressive and interesting study. However, after rechecking their statistics, it is clear that too many conclusions were drawn from the limited results.

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(Accepted for publication January 19, 2011.)

In Reply:
We thank Bloomstone for his interest in our article and for his comments. We entirely agree with him when he states that the weaning process is complex, multifactorial, and highly variable; this is also outlined in the editorial that accompanied our article. Our original hypothesis was that oxygen consumption (V\text{O}_2) would increase more in patients unable to sustain the weaning effort; this hypothesis was probably simplistic and did not account for some literature data, such as those published by Zakynthinos et al. On the other hand, we relied on solid evidence in the literature showing how increased V\text{O}_2 during weaning would be associated with failure. Moreover, Bloomstone wisely underlines how V\text{O}_2 is linked to the complex interplay between peripheral extraction and delivery. Unfortunately, as we acknowledge in the discussion of our article, the lack of assessment of the hemodynamic changes in our patients stands as a relevant limitation of our work.

We appreciate Chen’s deep attention in revising our data. In his sharp comment, he notes a paradox between the results of the Student t test and those of the ANOVA. However, the two tests are difficult to compare because they are performed on different sets of data. In fact, Chen neglects the fact that, although the minimum V\text{O}_2 readings were compared as absolute values using the Student t test, the ANOVA is performed after normalization of V\text{O}_2 by the minimum V\text{O}_2 reading of each patient. This normalization is expected to decrease the between-patient heterogeneity in the “absolute values” of V\text{O}_2, causing the observed increase in statistical significance. Moreover, at variance from figure 2 of the original article, using ANOVA, the levels of pressure support are expressed as difference from the “resting” level of pressure support, rather than as absolute values; in other words, all patients are “aligned” on the x-axis, with the minimum recorded V\text{O}_2 corresponding to the same level of pressure support. We agree with Chen regarding the appropriateness of Bland–Altman analysis to evaluate the reproducibility of V\text{O}_2 measurement. Because this was not included in our original article, we report it herein: the mean difference between the minimum V\text{O}_2 value during the decremental pressure support trial and the V\text{O}_2 during the resting phase was 14 ml/min (95% CI, 61 to −33 ml/min).

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(Accepted for publication January 19, 2011.)