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Use of Paracentesis in Hospitalized Patients with Decompensated Cirrhosis and Ascites: Opportunities for Quality Improvement

John Brooling, MD¹, Rony Ghaoui, MD², Peter K. Lindenauer, MD, MSc^{3,4,5}, Jennifer Friderici, MS^{5,6}, and Tara Lagu, MD, MPH^{3,4,5}

¹Division of Gastroenterology, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ

²Division of Gastroenterology, Baystate Medical Center, Springfield, MA

³Center for Quality of Care Research, Baystate Medical Center, Springfield, MA

⁴Division of General Medicine, Baystate Medical Center, Springfield, MA

⁵Department of Medicine, Tufts University School of Medicine, Boston, MA

⁶Epidemiology & Biostatistics Research Core, Baystate Medical Center, Springfield, MA

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To the Editor:

Ascites is the most common complication of cirrhosis leading to hospital admission.¹ Approximately 12% of hospitalized patients who present with decompensated cirrhosis and ascites have spontaneous bacterial peritonitis (SBP); half of these do not present with abdominal pain, fever, nausea, or vomiting.² Guidelines published by the American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases (AASLD) recommend paracentesis for all hospitalized patients with cirrhosis and ascites and also recommend long-term antibiotic prophylaxis for survivors of an SBP episode.³ Despite evidence that in-hospital mortality is reduced in those patients who receive paracentesis in a timely manner,^{4, 5} only 40–60% of eligible patients receive paracentesis.^{4, 6, 7} We aimed to describe clinical predictors of paracentesis and use of antibiotics following an episode of SBP in patients with decompensated cirrhosis and ascites.

Methods

We conducted a retrospective cohort study of adults admitted to a single tertiary-care center between 1 January 2009 and 31 December 2009.⁷ We included patients with an ICD-9 (International Classification of Diseases, Ninth Revision) discharge code consistent with

Corresponding Author and Requests for Reprints: Tara Lagu, MD, MPH, Baystate Medical Center, Center for Quality of Care Research, 280 Chestnut Street, Springfield, MA 01199, 413-794-7688 (p); 413-794-8866 (f), lagutc@gmail.com.

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decompensated cirrhosis who met clinical criteria for decompensated cirrhosis (eFigure 1)⁷ and had enough ascitic fluid to be sampled under imaging guidance. We collected presenting vital signs, laboratory data (within 24 hours of admission), evidence of infection other than SBP (e.g., urinary infection, pneumonia), results of peritoneal fluid analysis (defining SBP as ≥ 250 polymorphonuclear leukocytes), and use of antibiotic therapy. Our statistical analysis calculated summary statistics as means, medians, and proportions. Furthermore, we used multiple logistic regression to examine the association between predictors and receipt of paracentesis, including age, sex, and clinical measures associated with paracentesis at $p = 0.20$ using Fisher's Exact Test. Alpha was set at 0.05 (two-sided) for all comparisons.

Results

We identified 193 admissions for 103 patients with decompensated cirrhosis and ascites (Table 1). Of these, 41% (80/193) received diagnostic paracentesis. Mean/standard deviation (SD) for age was 53.6/12.4 years; 71% of patients were male and 63% were English-speaking. Common comorbidities included diabetes mellitus (33%), psychiatric diagnosis (29%), substance abuse (18%), and renal failure (17%). Excluding SBP, 31% of patients had another documented infection. Gastroenterology was consulted in 50% of the admissions. Fever was present in 27% of patients; elevated white blood cell (WBC) count (i.e., $\text{WBC} > 11\text{k}/\text{mm}^3$) was present in 27% of patients; International Normalized Ratio (INR) was elevated (>1.1) in 92% of patients, and 16% of patients had a platelet count of less than 50,000/cubic millimeter. Patients who received paracentesis were less likely to have a fever on presentation (19% vs. 32%, $p=0.06$), low (i.e., $<50,000/\text{cubic millimeter}$) platelet count (11% vs. 19%, $p=0.14$), or concurrent gastrointestinal (GI) bleed (6% vs. 16%, $p = 0.05$). In a multiple logistic regression model including characteristics associated at $p = 0.2$ with paracentesis, fever, low platelet count, and concurrent GI bleeding were associated with decreased odds of receiving paracentesis (Appendix 1).

Of patients who received a paracentesis ($n=80$), 14% were diagnosed with SBP. Of these, 55% received prophylaxis on discharge. Among patients who did not receive paracentesis ($n=113$), 38 (34%) received antibiotics for another documented infection (e.g., pneumonia), and 25 patients (22%) received antibiotics with no other documented infection or evidence of variceal bleeding. Of these 25 patients, presumed to be empirically treated for SBP (Figure 1), only 20% were prescribed prophylactic antibiotics on discharge.

Conclusion

We found that many patients with decompensated cirrhosis and ascites did not receive a paracentesis when hospitalized, which is similar to previously published data.^{4, 6, 7} Clinical evidence of infection, such as fever or elevated WBC count, did not increase the odds of receiving paracentesis. Many patients treated for SBP were not discharged on prophylaxis.

This study is limited by its small, single-center design. We could only use data from one year (2009), because study data collection was part of a quality improvement project that took place for that year only. We did not adjust for the number of red blood cells in the ascitic fluid samples. We were also unable to determine the timing of gastroenterology

consultation (whether it was done prior to paracentesis), admission venue (floor vs. intensive care), or patient history of SBP.

Despite these limitations, there are important implications. First, the decision to perform a paracentesis was not associated with symptoms of infection, although some clinical factors (e.g., low platelets or GI bleeding) were associated with reduced odds of receiving paracentesis. Second, a majority of patients treated for SBP did not receive prophylactic antibiotics at discharge. These findings suggest a clear opportunity to increase awareness and acceptance of AASLD guidelines among hospital medicine practitioners. Quality improvement efforts should focus on education of providers and future research should identify barriers to paracentesis at both the practitioner and system levels (e.g., availability of interventional radiology). Checklists or decision support within electronic order entry systems may also help reduce the low rates of paracentesis seen in our and prior studies.^{4, 6, 7}

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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Antibiotics (ABX) in Patients without Paracentesis (n=113)

Figure 1.

In those patients who did not receive paracentesis: pie chart on the left displaying percentage of patients in each group (red – no antibiotics; dark blue – receiving antibiotics for another infection; light blue – receiving antibiotics with no other infection) and on the right displaying the light blue group and whether they were discharged on antibiotics (green) or not (purple).

Table 1
Characteristics of Patients Overall, With Diagnostic Paracentesis, and Without Diagnostic Paracentesis

	Overall N=193*	Paracentesis (-) N=113	Paracentesis (+) N=80		Odds Ratio (95% CI)
			Mean/SD or N (%)	Mean/SD or N (%)	
Age	53.6/12.4	54.1/13.4	53.2/11.7	53.2/11.7	1.00 (0.98, 1.03)
Sex (Male)	137 (71.0%)	78 (69.0%)	59 (73.8%)	59 (73.8%)	1.26 (0.67, 2.39)
English-speaking	122 (63.2%)	69 (61.1%)	53 (66.3%)	53 (66.3%)	1.25 (0.69, 2.28)
Etiology					
Alcohol	120 (62.2%)	74 (65.5%)	46 (57.5%)	46 (57.5%)	0.71 (0.40, 1.29)
Hepatitis C	94 (48.7%)	57 (50.4%)	37 (46.3%)	37 (46.3%)	0.85 (0.48, 1.50)
Hepatitis B	16 (8.3%)	7 (6.2%)	9 (11.3%)	9 (11.3%)	1.92 (0.68, 5.39)
NASH	8 (4.2%)	4 (3.5%)	4 (5.0%)	4 (5.0%)	1.43 (0.35, 5.91)
Cryptogenic	11 (5.7%)	6 (5.3%)	5 (6.3%)	5 (6.3%)	1.19 (0.35, 4.04)
Comorbidities					
Substance Abuse	34 (17.6%)	22 (19.5%)	12 (15.0%)	12 (15.0%)	0.73 (0.34, 1.58)
Psychiatric Diagnosis	55 (28.5%)	38 (33.6%)	17 (21.3%)	17 (21.3%)	0.53 (0.27, 1.03)
Diabetes Mellitus	63 (32.6%)	37 (32.7%)	26 (32.5%)	26 (32.5%)	0.99 (0.54, 1.82)
Renal Failure	33 (17.1%)	20 (17.7%)	13 (16.3%)	13 (16.3%)	0.90 (0.42, 1.94)
GI Bleed	23 (11.9%)	18 (15.9%)	5 (6.3%)	5 (6.3%)	0.35 (0.12, 0.99)
Admission MELD	17.3/7.3	17.5/7.3	17.0/7.3	17.0/7.3	0.99 (0.95, 1.03)
Creatinine_(median IQR)	0.9/0.7	0.9/0.7	0.9/0.8	0.9/0.8	1.02 (0.82, 1.27)
GI Consult	97 (50.3%)	46 (40.7%)	51 (63.8%)	51 (63.8%)	2.56 (1.42, 4.63)
Infection_(UTI, Pneumonia, Other)	60 (31.1%)	38 (33.6%)	22 (27.5%)	22 (27.5%)	0.75 (0.40, 1.40)
Temperature 100.4°F	49 (26.8%)	34 (32.4%)	15 (19.2%)	15 (19.2%)	0.50 (0.25, 1.00)
WBC >11k/mm³	50 (27.3%)	28 (26.7%)	22 (28.2%)	22 (28.2%)	1.08 (0.56, 2.08)
WBC <4k/mm³	43 (23.5%)	23 (21.9%)	20 (25.6%)	20 (25.6%)	1.23 (0.62, 2.44)
INR >1.1**	149 (92.0%)	83 (93.3%)	66 (90.4%)	66 (90.4%)	0.68 (0.22, 2.13)
Highest Temperature (°F)	98.9/1.1	99.1/1.3	98.8/0.8	98.8/0.8	0.82 (0.62, 1.09)
Highest HR	98.2/20.4	97.4/22.4	99.2/17.4	99.2/17.4	1.00 (0.99, 1.02)

	Overall N=193*	Paracentesis (-) N=113	Paracentesis (+) N=80	Odds Ratio (95% CI)
		Mean/SD or N (%)	Mean/SD or N (%)	
Highest RR	24.5/13.7	25.2/16.8	23.5/7.8	0.99 (0.96, 1.02)
Lowest SBP	101.0/20.0	99.4/20.3	102.2/19.7	0.99 (0.98, 1.01)
Lowest MAP	73.0/12.2	73.2/13.3	72.7/10.6	1.00 (0.97, 1.02)
Lowest O ₂ sat	92.6/13.6	91.0/17.7	94.9/2.8	1.04 (0.99, 1.10)
Highest PT†	15.8/3.8	15.9/3.7	15.7/3.9	0.98 (0.90, 1.08)
Platelets 50k/mm ³ ‡	30 (15.9%)	21 (19.3%)	9 (11.3%)	0.53 (0.23, 1.23)

NASH-Nonalcoholic Steatohepatitis; DX-diagnosis; CHF-Congestive Heart Failure; CAD-Coronary Artery Disease; MELD-Model for End-Stage Liver Disease; IQR-Interquartile Range; GI-Gastroenterology; UTI-Urinary Tract Infection; WBC-White Blood Cell; INR-International Normalized Ratio; HR-Heart Rate; RR-Respiratory Rate; SBP-Systolic Blood Pressure; MAP-Mean Arterial Pressure; O₂Sat-Oxygen Saturation; PT-Prothrombin Time

* Fever, WBC, temperature, respiratory rate, SBP, MAP, and O₂ sat were documented for 183 patients (105 paracentesis patients and 78 non-paracentesis patients).

** INR was documented for 162 patients (73 paracentesis patients and 89 non-paracentesis patients).

† PT was documented for 133 patients (59 paracentesis patients and 74 non-paracentesis patients).

‡‡ Platelet count was documented for 189 patients.