e-ISSN: 0975-5160, p-ISSN: 2820-2651

Available online on www.ijtpr.com

International Journal of Toxicological and Pharmacological Research 2023; 13(3); 323-329

Original Research Article

Comparison of Ultrasound with Peripheral Nerve Stimulator Guided Technique for Supraclavicular Brachial Plexus Block in Upper Extremity Surgeries: A Prospective Study

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Received: 15-01-2023 / Revised: 18-02-2023 / Accepted: 06-03-2023

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Conflict of interest: Nil

Abstract

Background: The supraclavicular technique is regarded to be the most straightforward and efficient way to block the brachial plexus for surgeries on the upper extremities. The anatomical landmark approach used in the traditional approach was linked to greater failure rates and problems. The success rates and safety margin have increased due to peripheral nerve stimulator (PNS) and ultrasonography (USG) guidance.

Aim and Objectives: The current study compares USG and PNS for supraclavicular brachial plexus blocks used for upper extremity procedures in terms of the timing of the commencement of motor as well as sensory blockade, the overall duration of block, the length of the procedure, and any complications.

Study design: Randomized, prospective controlled study.

Material and Methods: 128 patients of over 18 years of age who were planned undergo elective upper extremity surgical procedures were randomly divided into one of the two groups. Supraclavicular brachial plexus blocks were given to patients in the Group USG under the supervision of ultrasound, while PNS was applied to the Group PNS. Bupivacaine 0.5% 15 ml and lignocaine 2% with 1:200000 adrenaline 10 ml were used as the local anaesthetic mixture in both groups. Independent t-test and Chi-square test are used to compare group means for categorical data.

Results: The USG procedure was shorter than the PNS procedure (11.58 ± 2.73 min vs. 21.74 ± 4.84 min). When compared to Group PNS, in Group USG sensory block onset time (12.84 ± 3.65 min vs. 16.11 ± 3.56 min) and motor block onset time (23.12 ± 4.28 min vs. 27.13 ± 3.87 min) were both considerably shorter ($P < 0.05$). Overall duration of sensory blockade remained substantially longer in Group USG (8.11 ± 0.91 hrs) than in Group PNS (7.26 ± 1.42 hrs), (P=0.0077). Nobody in either set of patients experienced any complications.

Conclusion: In comparison to the nerve stimulator technique, the ultrasound guided supraclavicular brachial plexus blockade can really be performed more rapidly and results in a rapid onset of sensory and motor block.

Keywords: Brachial Plexus block; Peripheral Nerve stimulator; Supraclavicular block; Ultrasound.

Introduction

The most straightforward and efficient method for blockade of the brachial plexus is thought to be the supraclavicular technique. The old approach of locating the nerve bundle utilizing paraesthesia and anatomical characteristics may have a higher failure rate and cause injury to nerve fibres or vascular systems [1].The peripheral nerve stimulator (PNS) allows for more precise localization of the brachial plexus by finding the nerves with limited flow of current (up to 2.5 mA) for a brief time (0.05–1 ms) and an insulating needle in order to produce a distinct reaction of muscle twitching or subjective perception and to administer local anaesthetic solution adjacent to the nerve [2] Yet, this strategy did not reduce the likelihood of surrounding structures being damaged [3]. The application of ultrasonography (USG) to find the brachial plexus has proved groundbreaking in regional anaesthesia. The only drawbacks are the price and the level of knowledge needed [4]. This study compared the procedure times, block properties, and complication rates of the two procedures mentioned above.

Aim and Objectives: The current study compares USG and PNS for supraclavicular brachial plexus blocks used for upper extremity procedures in terms of the timing of the commencement of motor and sensory blockade, the overall duration of the blockade, the length of the procedure, and any complications.

Material and Methods

Following approval from the institution's ethics committee, 128 patients undergoing elective upper limb surgery were enrolled.

Inclusion criteria: Individuals between the ages of 18 to 80 years with ASA physical status classifications I to III.

Exclusion criteria: Lack of willingness to participate, known neurological illnesses, coagulation disorders, skin infection at the site of block, and any known allergy to local anaesthetic drugs.

The day before surgery, a preanesthetic checkup was performed on each patient. Tablet Ranitidine 150 mg & tablet Metoclopramide 10 mg with tablet Lorazepam 1 mg were given orally to the patients the night well before procedure as well as two hours prior. Patients were moved to the operating room on call, where they underwent normal monitoring procedures such as heart rate, blood pressure, ECG and pulse oximetry. The non-operating hand was used for intravenous cannulation.

The USG or PNS groups were randomly assigned to all patients. The local anaesthetic solution was a 25 ml combination of 0.5% Bupivacaine 15 ml, 2% lignocaine with 1:200,000 adrenaline 10 ml.

Group USG (n=64): Ultrasound-guided supraclavicular block. A Sonosite Ultrasound device with a linear transducer of 4 cm and 5–10 MHz of frequency range of was used for the procedure. An extension of 10 cm with an 18G

cannula needle attached was used to administer medication. Patients were positioned supine with such a shoulder roll underneath them, their heads were tilted away from the blocked side, and an arm was placed downward to drag down their clavicles. The ultrasound probe was placed in an oblique plane in the supraclavicular region using a sterilized plastic sheath. The brachial plexus was first identified as a honeycomb-like hyperechoic and hypoechoic structure situated above first rib & pleura, also laterally to the subclavian artery.

Just after lignocaine 2% infiltration of the skin, an 18G needle attached to a three-way connection was inserted through the skin. The subclavian artery served as a reference when the needle was progressively inserted into the brachial plexus sheath after being shown on the screen. Normal saline 2 cc was injected under vision to track the spread. After confirming an adequate spread after a negative aspiration, at least two separate needle sites were utilised to inject the local anaesthetic mixture deeper into the brachial plexus sheath, both of which were located near the subclavian artery.

Group PNS (n=64): PNS-guided supraclavicular block. The positive electrode from PNS is attached to an ECG lead and placed in the ipsilateral shoulder, while the negative electrode is coupled to a 20G insulated needle. With the skin properly prepped, the subclavian artery subsequently located in the supraclavicular region, and 2% lignocaine was injected into the skin lateral to the artery. The needle entered about in an inch laterally from where the sternocleidomastoid attaches to the clavicle. The needle was inserted through the skin in a downward and inward motion, and the PNS was set to deliver a current of 1.5–2.5 mA at 1 Hz frequency and 0.1 ms pulse length.

A twitching in the shoulder musculature signalled the needle's passage to the upper trunk. The direction of the needle was changed so that it was angled slightly posteriorly and propelled caudally under the palpating finger. With this method, the needle is directed from the upper trunk (shoulder twitch) to the medial trunk (twitching of the triceps, biceps, and pectoralis) and then down to the lower trunk (fingers twitch). The purpose of this block was to induce a flexion or extension twitch in the fingers, thereby repositioning the needle's location closer to the lower trunk. After inducing a twitch in the patient's finger, the current was lowered progressively to 0.5 mA, and local anaesthetic was given after negative aspiration.

The procedure time is calculated as the time between the initial needle insertion and the final needle removal at the end of the block. The entire upper limb's cutaneous innervation, including the musculocutaneous, median, radial, medial cutaneous nerve of arm & forearm, ulnar, and intercostobrachial nerves, underwent sensory examination for pain and touch. The following scale was used to rate each dermatome's sensory block:

1. 2 - normal sensory perception
2. 1 – reduced sensory perception (hypoesthesia)
3. 0 - no sensory perception.

The onset timing of sensory block for each nerve was calculated as the time between the removal of the needle of block and the point at which a score of zero was achieved. By u sing a modified Bromage score scale for the upper extremities, motor block was assessed at 5, 10, 15, 20, & 30 min after drug administration.[5] Flexibility, abduction, extension, and adduction of the elbow, wrist, & fingers were evaluated. Motor block onset was defined as the time between the withdrawal of the needle of block and the attainment of a modified Bromage grade of 0.

Modified Bromage grade to assess motor weakness in upper limb:

1. Grade 0: Whole range of motion in the elbow, wrist, and fingers
2. Grade 1: Having flexible wrists and fingers

3. Grade 2: Flexing and extending fingers solely
4. Grade 3: Whole motor block, including the incapacity to move the elbow, wrist, or a finger.

During the surgery, light sedation (intravenous Midazolam 1-2 mg) was provided. Fentanyl 1 mcg/kg intravenously was administered as a supplement in the event that analgesia was insufficient. If the patient was still in pain after receiving general anaesthesia, the block was considered unsuccessful. Before being allowed back to their respective wards, all patients were observed for one full postoperative hour in the recovery facility. In addition, the following was noted:

1. The requirement for supplemental systemic medicine during surgery
2. Converting from regional to general anaesthesia (block failure)
3. Deleterious effects were noted, which were classified as vascular puncture, cardiac arrhythmias, seizures, SpO2 < 90%, Horner's phenomenon, symptoms of local anaesthetic toxicity, and pneumothorax.

Using a 10-point score visual analogue scale (0 = no pain, 10 = the worst pain imaginable), postoperative pain at the operative site was measured. A score greater than three was utilised as the cutoff for the duration of the blockade. 24 hours following the block, participants were monitored for complications such as pneumothorax and persistent paresthesia.

Statistical analysis

SPSS version 16.0 was used to conduct statistical analysis (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). For continuous variables, the data were expressed as mean and standard deviation; for categorical variables, they were expressed as numbers and percentages. The mean between both the groups was compared using an independent t-test, comparing categorical variables using the Chi-square test. Statistics are considered significant at $P < 0.05$.

Results

The patients in both groups had similar means for age, gender, weight, & ASA physical state categorization ($P > 0.05$). Systolic and diastolic blood pressure, as well as the mean heart rate was comparable amongst the groups. In Group USG, the average operation took 11.58 ± 2.73 minutes, but in Group PNS, it took 21.74 ± 4.84 minutes. This distinction was significant statistically ($P < 0.0001$). Statistically significant difference was observed ($P = 0.0009$) in terms of the mean time of onset of sensory blockade (score 0) was 12.84 ± 3.65 min in Group A USG and 16.11 ± 3.56 min in Group PNS. The mean time of onset of motor block was also statistically significant, and it was 27.13 ± 3.87 min in Group PNS and 23.12 ± 4.28 min in Group USG. ($P = 0.0003$).

According to Table 1, Group USG had a considerably longer mean sensory block duration than Group PNS (8.11 ± 0.91 min vs. 7.26 ± 1.42 min) with ($P = 0.0077$). The mean length of the motor block did not significantly differ between the two groups, though. The need for intravenous fentanyl replenishment was not significantly different either. Neither group's patients experienced any adverse outcomes such artery puncture, nerve damage, pneumothorax, or local anaesthetic toxicity. As compared to Group USG, only five of the 30 patients in Group PNS required intravenous fentanyl supplementation as an analgesic, albeit this difference wasn't really statistically significant. Neither group's patients needed to be converted to general anaesthesia.

Table 1: Parameters of block

Parameters	Group USG (n=30) (Mean±SD)	Group PNS (n=30) (Mean±SD)	P-Value
Procedure time (min)	11.58±2.73	21.74±4.84	<0.0001 (HS)
Onset of sensory block (min)	12.84±3.65	16.11±3.56	0.0009 (HS)
Onset of motor block (min)	23.12±4.28	27.13±3.87	0.0003 (HS)
Duration of sensory block (hrs)	8.11±0.91	7.26±1.42	0.0077 (HS)
Duration of motor block (hrs)	6.04±0.76	5.51±1.31	0.0602 (NS)

HS – Highly Significant, **NS** – Not Significant

Discussion

The supraclavicular block is one of the most popular procedures for brachial plexus blockage because it reliably and reliably anaesthetizes the whole upper limbs. Greenblatt and Denson were the first to find peripheral nerves via peripheral nerve stimulation in 1962 [6]. In recent decades, the peripheral nerve stimulator has been recognized as the gold standard for performing peripheral nerve blocking. In 1978, La Grange *et al*. reported using Doppler USG to locate subclavian vessels in order to conduct supraclavicular blocks [7].

The danger of harm to the adjacent structures is reduced by using USG, which aids in localization of the brachial plexus while guiding the needle. This study compared the effectiveness and complication rates of the two procedures mentioned above for executing supraclavicular block.

Singh *et al*., demonstrated considerably lower procedural time in USG group when compared to PNS group in supraclavicular block (8.14 v/s 10.63 minutes, respectively), which was similar to our study in which, the mean procedure time was considerably shorter in USG group when compared to PNS group (11.58 ± 2.73 min vs. 21.74 ± 4.84 min, respectively) (8.14 v/s 10.63 minutes, respectively) [8].

Similarly, Williams *et al*. & Ratnawat *et al*. found that performing the block utilizing USG as opposed to PNS required significantly less time [9,10]. Despite this, Duncan *et al*. discovered that the two aforementioned procedures had comparable execution times [11]. The PNS group's operation took a little longer than that of the USG group's because of the diverse relationship between the surface morphology and nerve location. In addition, the PNS approach required additional time because the initial response occurred at the shoulder, and the needle site had to be significantly changed posteriorly to elicit finger twitches. When employing the PNS technique that also employs the landmark method to find the plexus and necessarily requires multiple needle entries and needle readjusting, longer process times are unavoidable. However, positioning and any required needle repositioning are performed under direct visualization while using USG guidance.

When compared to PNS Group (16.11 ± 3.56 min and 27.13 ± 3.87 min, respectively), the mean times for both sensory block onset & motor block onset were observed to be considerably shorter in USG Group (12.84 ± 3.65 min and 23.12 ± 4.28 min, respectively). This is comparable to the study of Ratnawat *et al*., in which the USG group experienced considerably shorter mean times for sensory block onset and motor block onset (6.46 ± 1.02 and 8.10 ± 1.02 min, respectively) than the PNS group (7.68 ± 1.33 min and 9.94 ± 1.28 min, respectively). [10] Our results, however, were in contrast to those of a study by Duncan *et al*., where the USG and PNS groups' sensory and motor blockade onset times were comparable [11].

When compared with Group PNS (7.26 ± 1.42 h), the mean duration of nerve block seemed

significantly longer in Group USG (8.11 ± 0.91 h). Nonetheless, both groups' average motor block durations were comparable (P = 0.0602). Using inj. Ropivacaine 0.5% 30 ml solution, Ratnawat *et al*. found that the USG group's sensory as well as motor block lasted substantially longer (8.13 ± 1.63 h and 7.13 ± 1.63 h, respectively) than that of the PNS group's (6.14 ± 2.36 h and 5.14 ± 2.36 h, respectively).[10] Moreover, Singh *et al*. noted an extended block with USG. Our results are in contrast to those of Duncan *et al*., who found that a 1:1 combination of 0.5% bupivacaine, 2% lignocaine, and 1:200,000 adrenaline resulted in sensory and motor durations that were equivalent between the USG & PNS groups [11]. The supraclavicular block assisted by sonographic imaging helps determine the size, depth, and precise location of the surrounding structures, as well as their anatomy.

USG aids in the precise insertion of the needle, aids in distributing the local anaesthetic at the correct spot, and aids in visualizing the drug's distribution. This, in turn, accelerates the beginning of the blockade and may account for the extended length of block observed in our study.

In our study, 5 out of 30 participants in Group PNS needed intravenous Fentanyl to complement their analgesia, although none of the participants in Group USG did. This was shown to be statistically insignificant using Fisher's exact t-test (P = 0.052). There were no block failures in either group since none of the participants in either group needed to be converted to general anaesthesia. According to Singh *et al*., of the 102 participants, 45 out of 50 (90%) participants had successfully developed a block with USG, as opposed to 38 out of 52 (73.1%) patients in Group PNS who required further nerve blocks (P = 0.028) [8].

Duncan *et al*. and Williams *et al*. observed a similar occurrence of the successful block with both USG and PNS, despite the fact that block failure occurred with both groups. Jeon and Kim reported that the success rate when employing an PNS for supraclavicular brachial block was 93.7% and 75%, respectively, when both distal and proximal responses were observed [12]. In our investigation, the PNS group experienced both proximal and distal muscular reactions, which would explain their lack of block failures.

In our study, which was equivalent to that of Duncan *et al*., neither group was reported to have experienced artery puncture, pneumothorax, or nerve injury. Singh *et al*. discovered 7 arterial punctures in the PNS group as opposed to one in the USG group after check aspiration [11]. Many studies have proven a minimal or low incidence of complications when utilising USG, as it permits direct visualization of the needle in relation to the cervical pleura, hence reducing pleural puncture and pneumothorax formation [13-15].

Limitations of the study: A comprehensive multicentric study will give a more accurate depiction of the occurrence of complications, such as artery puncture and pneumothorax. In our experiment, we did not keep track of the needle pricks and realignments that are necessary for evaluating discomfort, pain, and satisfaction.

Conclusion

Utilizing USG-guided supraclavicular block, we observed a shorter duration of the treatment and a speedier onset of sensory and motor block. In addition, the USG technique significantly lengthened the sensory block compared to the PNS procedure. With neither of the two surgeries, complications such as artery rupture, nerve injury, or pneumothorax occurred.

During upper limb surgeries, the USG-guided supraclavicular block method performed markedly better than that of the nerve stimulator method in terms of procedural timing and block characteristics. Moreover, nerve stimulators can be utilized safely in circumstances when access to USG machines is restricted. In order to evaluate and compare the frequency of difficulties with various

procedures, additional research with a larger sample size is necessary.

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