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Variability in interpretation of chest radiographs among Russian clinicians and implications for screening programmes: observational study

Y Balabanova, R Coker, I Fedorin, S Zakharova, S Plavinskij, N Krukov, R Atun, F Drobniewski

Abstract

Objective To determine variability in interpretation of chest radiographs among tuberculosis specialists, radiologists, and respiratory specialists.

Design Observational study.

Setting Tuberculosis and respiratory disease services, Samara region, Russian Federation.

Participants 101 clinicians involved in the diagnosis and management of pulmonary tuberculosis and respiratory diseases.

Main outcome measures Interobserver and intraobserver agreement on the interpretation of 50 digital chest radiographs, using a scale of poor to very good agreement (κ coefficient: ≤0.20 poor, 0.21-0.40 fair, 0.41-0.60 moderate, 0.61-0.80 good, and 0.81-1.00 very good).

Results Agreement on the presence or absence of an abnormality was fair only (κ = 0.380, 95% confidence interval 0.376 to 0.384), moderate for localisation of the abnormality (0.448, 0.444 to 0.452), and fair for a diagnosis of tuberculosis (0.387, 0.382 to 0.391). The highest levels of agreement were among radiologists. Level of experience (years of work in the specialty) influenced agreement on presence of abnormalities and cavities. Levels of interobserver agreement were fair.

Conclusions Population screening for tuberculosis in Russia may be less than optimal owing to limited agreement on interpretation of chest radiographs, and may have implications for radiological screening programmes in other countries.

Introduction

Clinical interpretation of chest radiographs is important in the control of tuberculosis. Studies have examined interobserver and intraobserver agreement in interpretation of chest radiographs, and significant disagreement between observers has been reported.

Radiological examination plays an important part in the diagnosis and monitoring of tuberculosis, particularly in countries of the former Soviet Union such as the Russian Federation. The control of tuberculosis in Russia remains a challenge and an economic burden (incidence 86.0 per 100 000 population and mortality 21.5 per 100 000 population in 2002). Case finding is based on fluorographic screening of the population, and diagnosis may be made on the basis of radiological abnormalities without bacteriological confirmation.

The monitoring of treatment, the definition of cure, and the granting of permission for patients with tuberculosis to return to work after therapy largely depend on the resolution of radiological abnormalities. In Russia the validity of interpretation of chest radiographs is essential if the benefits of screening and monitoring of treatment are to be realised. In public health terms, false positive diagnoses will result in inefficient use of resources, and false negative diagnoses may pose a threat to public health through spread of tuberculosis. Misdiagnosis of active tuberculosis as latent infection and subsequent use of single drug chemoprophylaxis may result in drug resistance.

We determined interobserver and intraobserver variability in interpretation of chest radiographs among a group of Russian clinicians from the disciplines of radiology, respiratory medicine, and tuberculosis.

Methods

Our study was carried out in Samara, a Russian city about 1000 km south east of Moscow (population 1.2 million). We invited to take part in our study all specialists in tuberculosis, respiratory physicians from the two main local general hospitals, radiologists specialising in tuberculosis, and general radiologists.

The study material consisted of 50 high resolution digital posterior-anterior chest radiographs, selected from the archives at King’s College Hospital, London, which had a diagnosis—that is, they were interpretable. Thirty seven of the radiographs showed an abnormality and 13 were reported as normal. The 37 abnormal radiographs comprised 20 (54%) reported as tuberculosis, 7 (19%) reported as lung cancer, 5 (14%) reported as pneumonia, 4 (11%) reported as sarcoid, and 1 (3%) reported as fibrosing alveolitis. Twenty patients who were described as having tuberculosis on the basis of the chest radiograph were culture positive for Mycobacterium tuberculosis. The remaining 17 people had culture negative results for tuberculosis.

To assess intraobserver agreement, we randomly repeated 10 pairs of radiographs in the set. The participants were familiar with the digital format, as both conventional film radiographs and digital radiographs are used in Russia. For general population screening, however, a small radiograph (fluorogram) is used, which has much poorer resolution than digital radiographs. We converted these series of digital images into a high resolution slide presentation (Microsoft Powerpoint), which was reviewed by each participant in a darkened room during a single viewing session, independently from the other participants. The participants were given unlimited time to familiarise
themselves with images on the computer before they reviewed the radiographs. Abnormal and normal images were randomly mixed and each participant reviewed them in the same order. Each image was reviewed for two minutes, a period determined from a pilot study. This time also approximates to that spent reviewing images in population screening. No clinical information was provided, reflecting the normal situation of population screening. The participants were not allowed to review images they had already seen.

The participants recorded their interpretation of each radiograph on a structured questionnaire, using a five point scale: 1 = normal; 2 = abnormal but not clinically important; 3 = not certain, warrants further diagnostic evaluation; 4 = abnormal diagnosis uncertain, warrants further diagnostic evaluation; and 5 = abnormal—diagnosis apparent but warrants appropriate clinical management.

The questionnaire also included categorical questions requiring yes or no answers on the localisation of an abnormality and the presence of cavities. The participants were asked whether the radiographic findings were consistent with a diagnosis of tuberculosis and, if so, which form (according to the Russian classification system) and whether it was likely to be active. If observers suspected another diagnosis, they were asked to state the most likely diagnosis as free text.

Statistical analysis

We generated a receiver operating curve for three subgroups: tuberculous specialists, general radiologists, and respiratory specialists. To decrease the subjectivity of a single expert decision and the presence of cavities. The participants were asked whether the radiographic findings were consistent with a diagnosis of tuberculosis and, if so, which form (according to the Russian classification system) and whether it was likely to be active. If observers suspected another diagnosis, they were asked to state the most likely diagnosis as free text.

**Table 1** Agreement among Russian clinicians on evaluation of chest radiographs. Values are κ (95% confidence intervals)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Radiographic finding</th>
<th>All participants</th>
<th>Tuberculosis specialists</th>
<th>Radiologists</th>
<th>Respiratory specialists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clinically important abnormality:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal (category 1) versus any abnormality (categories 2-5)*</td>
<td>0.380 (0.376 to 0.384)</td>
<td>0.368 (0.361 to 0.374)</td>
<td>0.497 (0.483 to 0.514)</td>
<td>0.284 (0.257 to 0.311)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Categories 1 and 2 versus categories 3-5</td>
<td>0.479 (0.475 to 0.482)</td>
<td>0.466 (0.459 to 0.472)</td>
<td>0.564 (0.548 to 0.580)</td>
<td>0.490 (0.466 to 0.520)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All five categories*</td>
<td>0.217 (0.215 to 0.220)</td>
<td>0.225 (0.221 to 0.229)</td>
<td>0.252 (0.244 to 0.260)</td>
<td>0.198 (0.187 to 0.209)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Localisation of abnormality*:</td>
<td>0.448 (0.444 to 0.452)</td>
<td>0.285 (0.278 to 0.291)</td>
<td>0.503 (0.487 to 0.519)</td>
<td>0.342 (0.315 to 0.368)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left upper zone</td>
<td>0.518 (0.514 to 0.522)</td>
<td>0.168 (0.161 to 0.174)</td>
<td>0.496 (0.480 to 0.512)</td>
<td>0.458 (0.431 to 0.485)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right upper zone</td>
<td>0.547 (0.532 to 0.551)</td>
<td>0.441 (0.434 to 0.447)</td>
<td>0.525 (0.509 to 0.541)</td>
<td>0.532 (0.504 to 0.559)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left middle zone</td>
<td>0.355 (0.351 to 0.359)</td>
<td>0.567 (0.560 to 0.573)</td>
<td>0.343 (0.327 to 0.359)</td>
<td>0.283 (0.255 to 0.310)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right middle zone</td>
<td>0.351 (0.347 to 0.355)</td>
<td>0.347 (0.340 to 0.353)</td>
<td>0.331 (0.315 to 0.347)</td>
<td>0.342 (0.315 to 0.368)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left lower zone</td>
<td>0.425 (0.421 to 0.429)</td>
<td>0.356 (0.348 to 0.362)</td>
<td>0.495 (0.479 to 0.514)</td>
<td>0.265 (0.238 to 0.292)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right lower zone</td>
<td>0.378 (0.374 to 0.382)</td>
<td>0.401 (0.395 to 0.408)</td>
<td>0.510 (0.493 to 0.526)</td>
<td>0.226 (0.199 to 0.253)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of cavity</td>
<td>0.433 (0.428 to 0.438)</td>
<td>0.427 (0.420 to 0.435)</td>
<td>0.565 (0.545 to 0.583)</td>
<td>0.244 (0.213 to 0.275)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radiographic findings consistent with tuberculosis</td>
<td>0.367 (0.362 to 0.371)</td>
<td>0.377 (0.367 to 0.385)</td>
<td>0.448 (0.429 to 0.467)</td>
<td>0.386 (0.355 to 0.416)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form of tuberculosis*</td>
<td>0.272 (0.264 to 0.280)</td>
<td>0.272 (0.260 to 0.284)</td>
<td>0.323 (0.307 to 0.345)</td>
<td>0.199 (0.164 to 0.234)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuberculosis process active</td>
<td>0.153 (0.124 to 0.164)</td>
<td>0.119 (0.103 to 0.138)</td>
<td>0.244 (0.195 to 0.293)</td>
<td>0.041 (0.029 to 0.059)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Categories 1 and 2 reflect certainty that no clinically important abnormality present; categories 3 to 5 reflect some abnormality with clinical importance.

†κ produced by averaging κ values for each radiological zone.

‡According to Russian classification: mililiary, focal, caseous pneumonia, cavernous, cicatricial, tuberculosis of mediastinal lymph nodes, infiltrative, disseminated, tuberculoma, fibrocavernous, pleuritis.

Results

Overall, 61 of 80 (76%) tuberculosis specialists agreed to participate in our study, as did 15 of 18 (83%) respiratory specialists, all 12 specialist radiologists, and all 15 general radiologists (see table on bmj.com).

Overall agreement on the presence or absence of an abnormality on chest radiographs was fair only (κ = 0.380). Interobserver agreement was highest when we compared both normal findings and abnormal but not clinically important findings with the other responses (not certain, warrants further diagnostic evaluation; abnormal diagnosis uncertain, warrants further diagnostic evaluation; and abnormal—diagnosis apparent but warrants appropriate clinical management), although even then agreement was only moderate (0.479).

Agreement on localisation of abnormalities was moderate only (0.448; range 0.351-0.547) and agreement on determining a diagnosis of tuberculosis was fair only (0.387). For each of the 50 radiographs reviewed, tuberculosis was offered as a diagnosis by at least one participant. Agreement was highest among the radiologists, but still only moderate (0.448; table 1).

When we combined normal findings with abnormal but not clinically important findings, the more experienced participants showed greater agreement on presence or absence of abnormalities (0.388, 95% confidence interval 0.383 to 0.393 ν 0.355, 0.316 to 0.353) and detection of cavities (0.450, 0.444 to 0.456 ν 0.354, 0.331 to 0.376), but not when we took all five responses into account. Level of experience made little
difference to agreement on localisation of an abnormality and tuberculosis as a diagnosis.

We analysed agreement between the general radiologists and the specialist radiologists separately. The specialist radiologists showed higher levels of agreement on the four main questions posed: is a clinically important abnormality present, is a cavity present, are radiographic findings consistent with tuberculosis, and is the tuberculosis active? Based on this finding the “majority decision” of the tuberculosis radiologists on the question of whether the chest radiographs were consistent with tuberculosis or not was recorded and taken as a reference standard against which we created a receiver operating curve to compare the performance of other participants against the performance of tuberculosis radiologists (figure). The areas under the receiver operating curve were: tuberculosis specialists, 0.88 (95% confidence interval 0.78 to 0.98); respiratory specialists, 0.81 (0.68 to 0.94); and general radiologists, 0.81 (0.67 to 0.95), illustrating no statistically significant variation in the performance of respiratory specialists or general radiologists from the reference opinion of whether the chest radiograph showed possible tuberculosis. The majority opinion of tuberculosis specialists was significantly closer to the opinion of the reference group than to the opinions of the other two groups.

Intraobserver agreement for all responses on repeated radiographs was fair to moderate only (table 2). The radiologists had the highest levels of agreement (moderate to good; $\kappa$ range 0.529-0.627).

Between doctors with less than five years’ experience and those with five or more years’ experience, the largest difference in intraobserver agreement was in assessing whether an abnormality was present (0.423 v 0.465). Experience did not seem to play an important part in interobserver agreement for presence of abnormalities (0.215 v 0.219), being low overall.

**Discussion**

The interpretation of chest radiographs by Russian clinicians involved in the screening for and treatment of tuberculosis in Samara region is highly subjective and agreement was often low.

As Samara is a typical Russian city we believe that our findings may be generalisable throughout the Russian Federation. Levels of agreement were similar to other reports, but these studies were not carried out in settings where mass population screening is routine practice, nor in a post-Soviet environment. Moreover, these studies included radiologists whose opinion may have been influenced by that of work colleagues.

In our study, professional experience had some influence on the ability to detect abnormalities, including cavities, which may be a prerequisite for any successful method for screening populations. In general, the effect of professional professional seniority on levels of diagnostic agreement was limited. Intraobserver agreement was not high overall, with radiologists showing most consistency in agreeing with their previous opinions on chest radiographs.

The effectiveness of the Russian model of screening (general population screening is mandatory and annual targets are set) depends highly on the validity of the tools used (radiology) and the interpretation of findings. Given the relatively low intraobserver and interobserver agreement we found in the interpretation of chest radiographs by Russian clinicians, the implications are profound. A significant number of the general population may be wrongly told that they have tuberculosis, as the probability is extremely low. This has repercussions both for the individual and for the tuberculosis programme, as considerable scarce resources (budget expenditure and professionals’ time) may be used to exclude a diagnosis of tuberculosis. Under-capacity in microbiological laboratory services (the case in much of Russia, but not in Samara) means that refusing a putative diagnosis of tuberculosis is prone to error. It seems likely that many people are potentially wrongly diagnosed as having tuberculosis. Moreover, many patients with tuberculosis may not be identified.

Our study was limited in two ways. Firstly, owing to the small number of chest radiographs selected for second review, the $\kappa$ values for intraobserver agreement had wide and statistically insignificant confidence intervals. Secondly, the presence and type of abnormality was based on only one plain posterior-
What is already known on this topic

Radiological screening is an important tool in diagnosing tuberculosis

What this study adds

The interpretation of chest radiographs among health professionals is limited

In the absence of symptoms, population screening programmes for tuberculosis have a low positive predictive value

Competing interests: None declared.

Ethical approval: Not required.


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**Health Protection Agency National Mycobacterium Reference Unit, Department of Microbiology and Infection, Guy’s, King’s, and St Thomas’ Medical School, London**

Y Balabanova, research associate
FDrobniewski, professor

Samara Regional Tuberculosis Service, Samara Oblast Dispensary, Samara, Russia

I Fedorin, chief physician

Samara City Tuberculosis Service, Samara, Russia

S Zakharova, chief physician

College for Public Health, St Petersburg State Academy for Postgraduate Sciences, Russia

S Plavinskij, professor

---

Department of Internal Medicine, Samara State Medical University, Russia

N Krukov, professor

Department of Public Health and Policy, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London

R Coker, senior lecturer

Centre for Health Management, Tanaka Business School, Imperial College, London

R Arrn, reader

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Correspondence to: F Drobniewski, Health Protection Agency National Mycobacterium Reference Unit, Institute of Cell and Molecular Sciences, Queen Mary’s School of Medicine, London E1 2AT francis.drobniewski@kcl.ac.uk