Reliability of Prehospital Real-Time Cellular Video Phone in Assessing the Simplified National Institutes of Health Stroke Scale in Patients With Acute Stroke

A Novel Telemedicine Technology

Manuel A. Gonzalez, MD, MPH; Nicholas Hanna, MD; Maria E. Rodrigo, MD; Lowell F. Satler, MD; Ron Waksman, MD

Background and Purpose—The National Institutes of Health Stroke Scale (NIHSS) is the gold standard to assess patients with acute stroke. We aimed to examine the feasibility and reliability of prehospital real-time cellular video phone (VP) in performing the NIHSS.

Methods—Forty physicians prospectively performed a simplified NIHSS (sNIHSS) on a standardized patient remotely using VP with the assistance of a bedside emergency medical technician and later performed a bedside examination. We tested the hypothesis that there is high reliability between these 2 methods. Physicians were timed and sNIHSS scores were recorded. Finally, physicians were asked to rate the VP technology.

Results—A total of 480 pair comparisons of the sNIHSS scores between the VP and bedside examination were generated. After adjusting for the physician’s specialty, level of training, and certification status, there was a strong positive linear correlation (r=0.97, P<0.01) between the 2 methods with high average physician reliability (0.99; 95% CI, 0.992 to 0.995). The mean sNIHSS scores using VP and bedside examination were not different (6.82 ± 1.06 versus 6.63 ± 0.98; P=0.08). The mean time to perform the sNIHSS using VP was approximately 38 seconds longer than the bedside examination (3.38 ± 0.77 versus 2.93 ± 0.83 minutes; P=0.006).

Conclusions—The VP is a feasible, reliable, and timely tool with the potential for remotely assessing the sNIHSS for patients presenting with acute stroke and may expedite the initial evaluation and treatment strategies. (Stroke. 2011; 42:00-00.)

Key Words: acute stroke ■ cellular video phone ■ National Institutes of Health Stroke Scale ■ telemedicine
performed the sNIHSS assessment remotely using the VP (Figure 1 and Video) with the assistance of a bedside emergency medical technician (Figure 2) and within 5 minutes performed a bedside examination. Physicians were asked to rate the VP on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest rating (1=poor, 2=fair, 3=good, 4=very good, and 5=excellent). Participating physicians were given instructions on how to use the cellular VP, the research protocol, the case presentation, and the description of the neurological deficit (Supplemental Appendix I; http://stroke.ahajournals.org). In addition, physicians were asked: “Assuming that this patient with the deficits that you identified has a CT scan of the brain revealing no evidence of intracranial hemorrhage and no contraindication to thrombolytics, would you recommend thrombolytic therapy?” Finally, if the physician had no NIHSS certification, a 5-minute in-service on how to administer the sNIHSS scale was given.

Simplified National Institutes of Health Stroke Scale
The original NIHSS has 15 subscales. The modified NIHSS is a reliable method of assessing patients with stroke. Kothari and others demonstrated that in prehospital evaluation of patients with acute stroke the most reliable subscales are facial palsy, arm motor deficit, and abnormal speech with 100% sensitivity and 88% specificity. We simplified the NIHSS by keeping these subscales and removing the visual field, sensory, and extinction/neglect subscales with the goal of shortening the time needed for completion at the same time as maintaining good test performance as illustrated in the Table.

Cellular VP
AT&T provided the cellular VP (Nokia model E71x), the third generation (3G) network service with data speed up to 3.6 megabits per second, and the Video Share software that allows 2-way voice and 1-way real-time video. AT&T’s network uses an advanced data encryption standard of 128 key by 128 block size. The Nokia E71x specifications include a speaker phone and a display with 2.4 inches, 16 million colors, and 240×320 pixels. Further specifications can be found at: www.wireless.att.com/businesscenter/NokiaE71x/index.jsp.

Statistical Analysis
Continuous variables were summarized as mean±SD and compared using the t test, whereas categorical variables were summarized as frequencies and compared using the χ² test. Multiple linear regression analysis was performed to test the intermethod reliability of the sNIHSS scores between VP and bedside examination adjusting for...
A total of 40 physicians (internal medicine, 40%; neurology, 7.5%; cardiology, 25%; and emergency medicine, 27.5%) participated in the study. The training levels were as follows: attending (30%), postgraduate Year 1 (22%), postgraduate Year 2 (12.5%), postgraduate Year 3 (15%), postgraduate Year ≥4 (20.4%). With the exception of the 3 stroke fellows, no other participating physicians had NIHSS certification or extensive experience administering the scale before this study. After adjusting for specialty, level of training, and NIHSS certification status, there was a strong positive linear association between the methods in completing the NIHSS scores in 24 patients with acute stroke. The mean time to perform the sNIHSS using VP was approximately 38 seconds longer than in the bedside examination (Figure 4). The physician ratings of the VP technology are presented in Figure 5. The proportion of physicians who rated the image quality, ease of use, and reception in the hospital as very good to excellent was 80%; the use to expedite the assessment and make the diagnosis was 95%, and the sound quality was 65%. All physicians recommended the use of thrombolytic after performing sNIHSS with both methods.

The main findings in our study are that there is very good intermethod reliability performing the sNIHSS with VP and bedside examination, there are no differences in the final sNIHSS scores between the methods, and there is good interphysician agreement performing the sNIHSS with VP, but it takes 38 seconds longer to be completed compared with bedside examination. However, participating physicians evaluated the VP technology very favorably and were equally likely to recommend thrombolytic therapy with either method.

Agreement With the Published Literature

Advances in telemedicine have improved mobility with wireless Internet-based stations and more recently mobile personal device assistant applications. The application of NIHSS in its original1,7,13,14,17–24 or modified format9,10,30–32 in evaluating patients with acute stroke has been validated by neurologists,7,8,10,11,12,15–17 nonneurologist physicians,2,4,11 trainees, 12 nurse coordinators,4,10,11,37,38 and emergency medical technicians.32,39 Studies have confirmed the benefits of telemedicine application
of NIHSS in the prehospital setting,\textsuperscript{19,20,31,32,40} aiming to decrease ischemic time and facilitate the use of thrombolytic.\textsuperscript{16,18,21,23,26} The mean time of 3.4 ± 0.8 minutes it took to complete the sNIHSS with VP in our study is shorter than the mean of 11.4 minutes (range, 8 to 18 minutes)\textsuperscript{13} and the mean 9.7 minutes\textsuperscript{1} it took to complete a full NIHSS in other studies. The high proportion of physicians rating the VP technology as very good to excellent compares favorably with the 50% of medical staff rating video quality, time consumption, and medical relevance as excellent in the Telemedical Project for Integrative Stroke Care (TEMPIS).\textsuperscript{40}

Disagreement With the Published Literature
The overall reliability of the VP is good and is consistent with previous telemedicine studies.\textsuperscript{1,12,13,34,41} However, the analysis of individual subscale performance in the Table reveals that level of consciousness commands, facial palsy, leg motor, and dysarthria has lower interphysician agreement compared with those reported by Handschu et al\textsuperscript{13} and Meyer et al,\textsuperscript{34} but overall are not dissimilar to other studies.\textsuperscript{1,12,41} In particular, the least agreement is observed in the facial palsy and leg motor subscales. It appears that the image quality or the angle of projection in these 2 subscales was not sufficiently clear to make an accurate assessment. Our standardized patient was instructed to follow all commands and to answer all questions correctly. However, the interphysician agreement for the “follows commands” subscale was only 0.63 due to 6 physicians incorrectly scoring this subscale rather than a problem with the VP technology.

Figure 3. Correlation of simplified National Institute of Health Stroke Scale scores with cellular video phone and bedside examination. $r$ indicates regression correlation coefficient (measure of reliability); sNIHSS, simplified National Institute of Health Stroke Scale.

Figure 4. Time differences in performing the simplified National Institute of Health Stroke Scale with cellular video phone and bedside examination. PRT-CVP indicates prehospital real-time cellular video phone; mNIHSS, modified National Institute of Health Stroke Scale.
Implication for Practice

The VP technology has the potential to advance our knowledge, quality of care, and the outcome of patients with acute stroke. However, a careful analysis of the advantages and barriers in implementing this technology in the prehospital setting is important. Among the most important advantages are: (1) expediting of the patient assessment, improvement in the accuracy of the history, help in clarifying the time of symptom onset, and the differential diagnosis; (2) allowing real-time remote performance of NIHSS by physicians in a simple, inexpensive, and reliable fashion; (3) decreasing healthcare costs by reducing false activation of the stroke team and unnecessary transfer of patients; (4) speeding up the initiation of the informed consent process for thrombolytic therapy with patients and the family; (5) good physician acceptance; (6) increased access any time and anywhere to stroke neurologists and primary stroke centers; (7) potentially shorter ischemic time and increased number of candidates for thrombolysis and neurointerventions; and (8) potential decrease in death rate, length of stay, and permanent disability.

The most important limitations and implementation barriers of VP technology include: (1) limited coverage in remote areas; (2) quality of the sound and image, speed of data transmission, and only 1-way video and 2-way audio (future 4G network will have 2-way video and 2-way audio); (3) security of information, inappropriate or unauthorized use, compliance with privacy and security laws, and telemedicine regulations and compliance with fraud and abuse statutes; (4) limited reimbursement and funding opportunities; (5) physician adoption and promotion of the new technology; and (6) physician licensure, credentialing, and medical liability. To comply with telemedicine, privacy, and security laws, VP uses advanced data encryption standard of 128 key by 128 block size, the data are transmitted over a virtual private network, the phone is password-protected, has auto log-out, and has remote wipe-out data capability if needed. Finally, the VP technology is relatively inexpensive, but a cost analysis is important. The retail price of the Nokia model E71x cellular VP is approximately $200 and the monthly service fee for the AT&T 3G network is approximately $135 per month or $1620 per year. This compares favorably with other telemedicine systems estimated to cost approximately $30,000 to $50,000 per year for 1 hub and spoke center.

Our study has several limitations. First, we had a small number of neurologists and physicians with NIHSS certification participating in the study. Second, we used a sNIHSS for practical reasons and we do not know whether these results can be replicated with the full scale. Third, we only evaluated 1 form of acute stroke syndrome (right middle cerebral artery) in a standardized patient to control for variability under experimental conditions and we do not know how these results apply to a heterogeneous stroke population. Furthermore, the study was performed in a quiet room and we do not know whether sound quality will be adequate when the examination is performed in the field, ambulance, or a noisy emergency department. In addition, we did not involve real patients in this stage of the VP evaluation because of the lack of safety data on clinical application. Finally, the effects of confounding variables and remaining bias cannot be completely excluded.

Conclusions

The VP is a feasible, reliable, and inexpensive telemedicine method of administering the sNIHSS to standardized patients with acute stroke in the prehospital setting by physicians from a wide range of specialties and levels of training using the assistance of bedside emergency medical technicians. The technology has high acceptance and has the potential to expedite initial assessment and management of patients with acute stroke.

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Legend for video file

Physician performing the simplified National Institutes of Health Stroke Scale assessment remotely in real time using the video-phone with the assistance of a bedside emergency medical technician.