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Evidence of Mycobacterial Disease in Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease Patients, the importance of Histological Assessment

Nighat Ara[1], Zahid Sarfaraz Khan[2] ✉, Shaista Alam[3], Mohsina Haq[4], Muhammad Abbas[5], Salman Khan[6]

[1]Department of Anatomy, Nowshera Medical College, Nowshera - Pakistan [2]Department of Anatomy, Khyber Girls Medical College, Peshawar - Pakistan [3]Department of Microbiology, Pak International Medical College, Peshawar - Pakistan [4]Department of Pathology, Peshawar Medical and Dental College, Riphah University, Islamabad - Pakistan [5]Department of Medicine, Peshawar Medical College, Prime Teaching Hospital, Peshawar - Pakistan [6]Department of Medicine, Gomal Medical College, Dera Ismail Khan - Pakistan

Corresponding author:
Zahid Sarfaraz Khan
Department of Anatomy,
Khyber Girls Medical College,
Peshawar - Pakistan
Email: zahidsurfarazmc@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Background: Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) is a prevalent respiratory condition often exacerbated by bacterial infections. However, atypical mycobacteria, which are opportunistic pathogens, can also significantly contribute to COPD exacerbations, particularly in individuals with pre-existing lung damage.

Objective: To investigate the role of non-tuberculous mycobacteria (NTM) in COPD exacerbations and emphasize the importance of histological assessment in detecting and characterizing these infections.

Methodology: The study employed a prospective cohort design involving 112 patients with chronic respiratory conditions. Comprehensive demographic and clinical data, including occupational history and lifestyle factors, were collected. Diagnosis of NTM pulmonary disease adhered to American Thoracic Society guidelines, incorporating symptom assessment, imaging, and sputum cultures. Histopathological evaluation of lung tissue from bronchial lavage was performed to assess bronchiolectasis and inflammation. Standardized data collection and management ensured accuracy, and regular follow-ups were conducted to monitor disease progression and treatment outcomes.

Results: The study on COPD patients with non-tuberculous mycobacterial infections involved 112 participants, including 69 males (61.98%) and 43 females (38.02%). Histopathological findings included bronchiolar inflammation in 62 patients (55.36%), bronchiolectasis in 54 patients (48.21%), peribronchiolar inflammation in 47 patients (41.96%), and granuloma formation in 33 patients (29.46%). Regarding treatment outcomes, 40 patients (35.71%) improved, 46 patients (41.07%) remained stable, and 26 patients (23.21%) worsened. Chi-square tests showed significant associations between NTM infections and persistent cough ($\chi^2 = 12.34$, $p = 0.0004$), hemoptysis ($\chi^2 = 7.89$, $p = 0.0050$), chest pain ($\chi^2 = 15.76$, $p < 0.0001$), and dyspnea ($\chi^2 = 14.32$, $p = 0.0002$).

Conclusion: This study highlights the crucial role of histological assessment in accurately diagnosing and understanding non-tuberculous mycobacterial infections in COPD patients, emphasizing its impact on effective disease management.

Keywords: Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease; Non-Tuberculous Mycobacteria; Histological Assessment; Bronchiectasis

Introduction

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is a prevalent and preventable respiratory condition characterized by persistent symptoms and airflow limitation.[1] COPD exacerbations play a crucial role in disease management, negatively impacting health status, hospitalization rates, and overall disease progression.[2] The bacterial culprits behind COPD exacerbations often include Haemophilus influenzae, Streptococcus pneumoniae, Moraxella catarrhalis, and Pseudomonas aeruginosa.[3] Notably, atypical mycobacteria, considered opportunistic pathogens, are more likely to cause disease in the presence of compromised local or systemic host immunity. This makes them particularly relevant in patients with pre-existing lung damage.[4] The potential involvement of atypical mycobacteria in respiratory diseases, especially among individuals with compromised immune systems or existing lung damage, emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive approach to COPD exacerbation management, addressing both bacterial and mycobacterial contributors to respiratory distress. The colonization of the lower respiratory tract by atypical mycobacteria stands out as an independent stimulant for airway inflammation, exerting a notable influence on the nature and frequency of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) exacerbations.[5] Distinguished from tuberculosis and leprosy, non-tuberculosis mycobacteria (NTM) represent a diverse group of environmental mycobacteria with over 100 species, each varying in pathogenicity.[6] The most common manifestation of NTM is pulmonary disease, typically diagnosed using the criteria outlined by the American Thoracic Society (ATS). According to guidelines, a diagnosis necessitates the presence of pulmonary symptoms, coupled with nodular or cavitatory opacities on imaging, and positive cultures obtained from two or more separate sputum samples or one positive culture from tissue/bronchial lavage samples.[7,8] The prevalence of NTM infection is on the rise globally, a trend attributed in part to heightened exposure and an increasing population of susceptible individuals. As the prevalence of non-tuberculosis mycobacteria (NTM) infections continues to rise globally, there is an imperative need for an in-depth understanding of NTM-related pulmonary diseases. This underscores the significance of accurate diagnosis and prompt intervention to effectively navigate the evolving landscape of respiratory health challenges worldwide. NTM, characterized as opportunistic bacteria, pose an increased risk of causing disease in the presence of defects in local or systemic host immunity. This vulnerability is particularly pronounced in patients with pre-existing lung conditions, such as Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), cystic fibrosis (CF), and bronchiectasis, as highlighted in literature.[9,10] Song and colleagues employed high-resolution computer tomography (HRCT) to clarify the degree of bronchiectasis, inflammatory bronchiolitis, and emphysema in individuals with NTM infection. The outcomes indicated an association with small airway disease during pulmonary function tests, underscoring the interconnection between NTM infection and abnormalities in respiratory function.[11] This multifaceted understanding of NTM-related pulmonary diseases, encompassing both clinical associations and imaging correlations, enhances our ability to tailor interventions specifically to the needs of patients with pre-existing lung conditions. It emphasizes the importance of a nuanced approach to diagnosis and treatment in the context of diverse respiratory conditions, contributing to the ongoing efforts to address the complexities of pulmonary health on a global scale. Moreover, these HRCT observations aligned histologically with bronchiolectasis, bronchiolar inflammation, and peribronchiolar inflammation, with or without granuloma formation, as identified in research conducted by Jeong et al.[12] These investigations suggest that NTM infection may manifest as a form of small airway disease akin to hypersensitivity pneumonitis associated with Mycobacterium avium complex (MAC).[13–15] The predominant risk factor for COPD remains tobacco smoking, and various studies have consistently highlighted the strong association between chronic respiratory conditions and the susceptibility to NTM pulmonary diseases. Histological assessment of specimens is a crucial diagnostic tool in medical research, particularly in understanding the complex interplay between diseases and their impact on tissues. In the context of the study on mycobacterial disease in COPD patients, histological assessment involves the microscopic examination of lung tissue specimens obtained from affected individuals. This meticulous examination allows researchers to observe and analyze the cellular and tissue structures at a microscopic level, providing insights into the presence and characteristics of mycobacterial infections. Histological assessment is vital for identifying subtle changes in cellular morphology, such as granulomas or inflammation, which are indicative of mycobacterial diseases. It goes beyond traditional diagnostic methods, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the pathological changes associated with infections. The technique not only aids in confirming the presence of mycobacterial pathogens but also contributes to the characterization of the infection, including its severity and potential impact on surrounding tissues. Ultimately, histological assessment plays a pivotal role in advancing diagnostic accuracy, facilitating tailored treatment approaches, and enhancing our overall understanding of the intricate relationships between COPD and mycobacterial infections.

This study investigated the role of non-tuberculous mycobacteria (NTM) in COPD exacerbations and emphasized the importance of histological assessment in detecting and characterizing these infections. By

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of study cases

Category		Number of Patients (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	69	61.98
	Female	43	38.02
Age (years)	28-38	48	42.86
	48-58	35	31.25
	≥60	29	25.89
Geographic Location	Urban	76	67.86
	Rural	36	32.14

examining the histology of lung tissue from COPD patients, the study seeks to identify non-tuberculous mycobacterial (NTM) infections and highlight subtle cellular changes indicative of mycobacterial diseases within the COPD population. The overarching goal is to contribute insights that inform the development of enhanced diagnostic strategies for identifying mycobacterial infections in COPD patients and, consequently, contribute to more tailored and effective treatment approaches. Through these objectives, the research underscores the pivotal significance of histological assessment in advancing our comprehension of mycobacterial diseases in COPD patients.

Objective

To investigate the role of non-tuberculous mycobacteria (NTM) in COPD exacerbations and emphasize the importance of histological assessment in detecting and characterizing these infections.

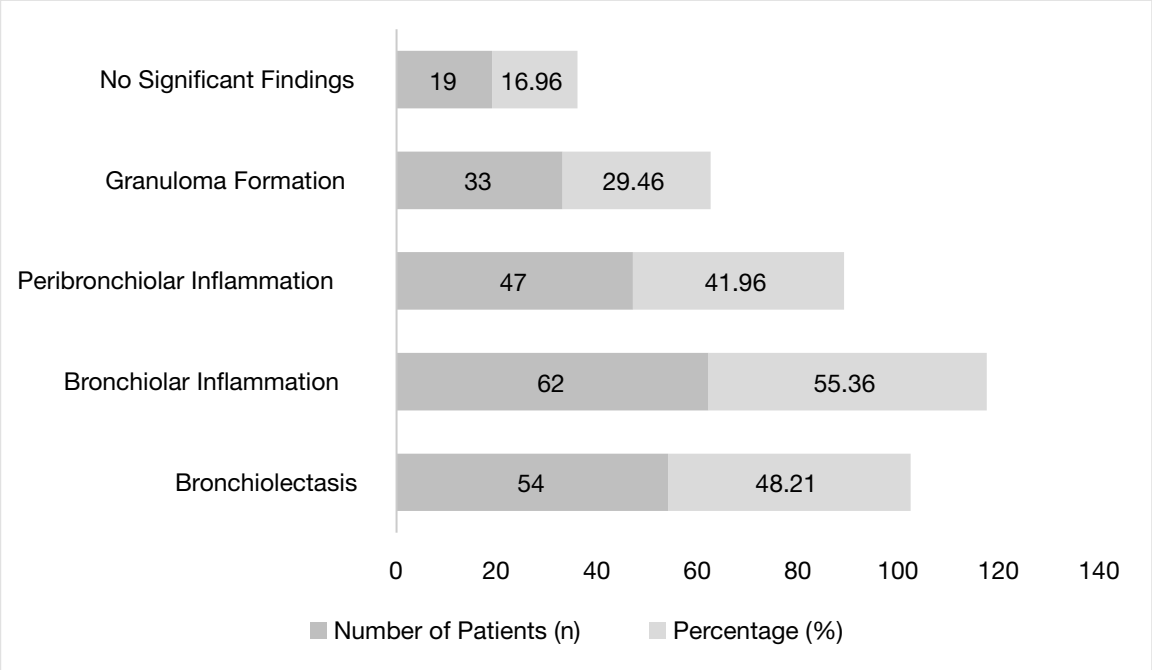

Figure 1. Histopathological Findings in Lung Tissue of COPD Patients with Non-Tuberculous Mycobacterial Infections

Table 2. Clinical Symptoms of COPD Patients with Non-Tuberculous Mycobacterial Infections

Symptom		Number of Patients (n)	Percentage (%)
Persistent Cough	Yes	67	62.00
	No	45	38.00
Hemoptysis	Yes	29	24.00
	No	33	31.00
Chest Pain	Yes	70	69.00
	No	42	31.00
Dyspnea	Yes	68	69.00
	No	44	31.00

Methodology

The study utilized a prospective cohort design, focusing on a diverse population of patients diagnosed with chronic respiratory conditions, including chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), cystic fibrosis (CF), and bronchiectasis. This design was selected to allow for the longitudinal observation of disease progression and treatment outcomes in relation to non-tuberculosis mycobacteria (NTM) infections. A total of 112 patients were enrolled, each providing comprehensive demographic data, including age, gender, and socioeconomic status, which were essential for understanding the baseline characteristics of the study population. In addition to demographic information, detailed occupational histories, lifestyle factors (such as smoking and exposure to environmental pollutants), and pre-existing medical conditions were recorded. This approach ensured the creation of a comprehensive profile for each participant, aiding in the assessment of factors

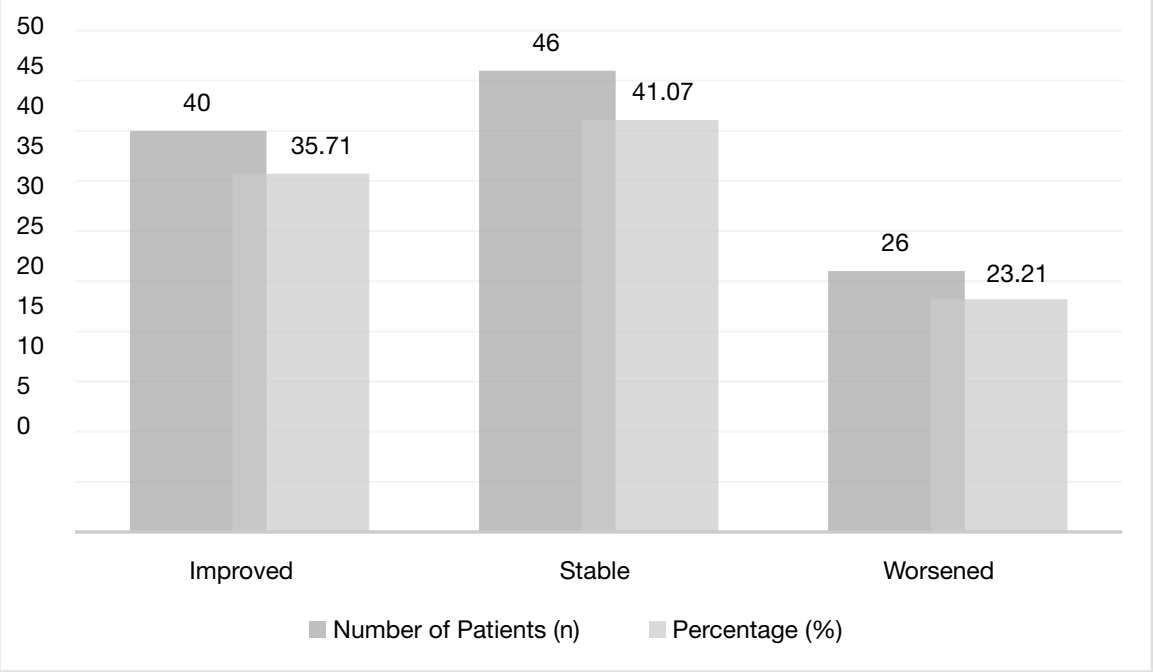

Figure 2. Treatment Outcomes in COPD Patients with Non-Tuberculous Mycobacterial Infections

Table 3. Chi-Square Test Results for Association Between Non-Tuberculous Mycobacterial Infections and Clinical Symptoms

Clinical Symptom	Chi-Square Value	Degrees of Freedom (df)	p-Value
Persistent Cough	12.34	1	0.0004
Hemoptysis	7.89	1	0.0050
Chest Pain	15.76	1	<0.0001
Dyspnea	14.32	1	0.0002

that might influence the susceptibility to or progression of NTM-related pulmonary diseases.

The diagnostic criteria for NTM pulmonary diseases adhered strictly to the guidelines established by the American Thoracic Society (ATS). Diagnosis was based on a multifaceted approach that included both clinical and microbiological criteria. Pulmonary symptoms, such as persistent cough, hemoptysis, chest pain, and dyspnea, were carefully evaluated. Clinical criteria were determined through imaging studies, which identified nodular or cavitary opacities, suggesting potential NTM infections. For microbiological confirmation, positive cultures from two or more separate sputum samples were required to detect the presence of NTM. This rigorous diagnostic protocol ensured that only patients with confirmed NTM pulmonary disease were included in the study, thereby enhancing the validity of the findings.

To further characterize the study population, a detailed symptomatology assessment and physical examination were conducted. This involved evaluating symptoms such as bronchiolectasis, bronchiolar inflammation, and peribronchiolar inflammation. Physical examinations included auscultation, imaging, and spirometry to document the extent of lung involvement. Histopathological evaluations provided microscopic insights into the pathology of the disease, using tissue samples obtained through bronchial lavage procedures. These analyses allowed for a deeper understanding of the structural and inflammatory changes associated with NTM infections.

Data collection was standardized through the use of carefully designed forms that systematically captured all relevant details from the participants. These forms included sections for demographic information, clinical symptoms, diagnostic test results, and treatment outcomes. Data entry and management were conducted using secure, electronic systems to ensure consistency, reduce errors, and facilitate organized data storage and retrieval. Regular audits of the data management process were performed to maintain the integrity and confidentiality of the information. Additionally, systematic data management procedures were implemented to ensure that all collected data were accurately recorded and readily available for analysis.

Regular follow-ups were integral to the study, allowing for the continuous monitoring of disease progression and treatment efficacy. Participants were revisited at predefined intervals to assess changes in their health status, responses to therapy, and any new symptoms or complications. These follow-ups included repeat imaging studies, sputum cultures, and clinical evaluations to track the course of NTM-related pulmonary diseases over time. This longitudinal approach provided valuable insights into the chronic nature of these infections and their impact on patients' quality of life.

Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS software (version 23). Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize the demographic and clinical characteristics of the study population. Continuous variables, such as age and laboratory parameters, were expressed as means and standard deviations, while categorical variables, such as gender and the presence of specific symptoms, were presented as frequencies and percentages. Associations between NTM infections and specific clinical features, such as the presence of cough, hemoptysis, and imaging findings, were evaluated using chi-square tests for categorical variables. The significance level was set at $p < 0.05$ to ensure the reliability of the results. Additionally, multivariate logistic regression analysis was performed to identify independent predictors of NTM infection, adjusting for potential confounders such as age, gender, and underlying respiratory conditions. This comprehensive statistical approach allowed for a robust analysis of the data, providing insights into the factors associated with NTM pulmonary diseases in the study cohort.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional review board (IRB) before the commencement of any research activities. All participants were fully informed about the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant before enrollment. The study adhered to ethical guidelines outlined by the Declaration of Helsinki, ensuring the protection of participants' rights, privacy, and well-being throughout the research process. Participants were assured that their participation was

voluntary, and they could withdraw from the study at any time without any impact on their standard care.

Results

The present study consisted of 112 patients, with 69 males (61.98%) and 43 females (38.02%). The age distribution was as follows: 48 patients (42.86%) were aged 28-38 years, 35 patients (31.25%) were aged 48-58 years, and 29 patients (25.89%) were aged 60 years or older. Geographically, 76 patients (67.86%) resided in urban areas, while 36 patients (32.14%) were from rural locations (Table 1).

Table 2 presents the clinical symptoms experienced by COPD patients with non-tuberculous mycobacterial infections. Among the 112 patients, 67 (62.00%) reported persistent cough, while 45 (38.00%) did not. Hemoptysis was observed in 29 patients (24.00%), with 33 patients (31.00%) not experiencing this symptom. Chest pain was noted in 70 patients (69.00%), whereas 42 patients (31.00%) did not report chest pain. Dyspnea affected 68 patients (69.00%), with 44 patients (31.00%) not experiencing this symptom. This data highlights the prevalence of each symptom among the study cohort.

Figure 1 presents the histopathological findings in lung tissue of COPD patients with non-tuberculous mycobacterial infections. Bronchiolar inflammation was observed in 62 patients (55.36%), bronchiolectasis in 54 patients (48.21%), peribronchiolar inflammation in 47 patients (41.96%), and granuloma formation in 33 patients (29.46%). Additionally, 19 patients (16.96%) showed no significant histopathological findings. This data underscores the varied histological manifestations of NTM infections in COPD patients, highlighting the importance of detailed histological assessment for accurate diagnosis.

Figure 1. Histopathological Findings in Lung Tissue of COPD Patients with Non-Tuberculous Mycobacterial Infections

Figure 2 outlines the treatment outcomes for COPD patients with non-tuberculous mycobacterial infections. Of the patients, 40 (35.71%) showed improvement, 46 (41.07%) remained stable, and 26 (23.21%) experienced worsening of their condition. This distribution reflects the varied effectiveness of treatment strategies and highlights the need for ongoing management and evaluation of therapeutic approaches.

Table 3 displays the results of chi-square tests examining the association between non-tuberculous mycobacterial infections and clinical symptoms in COPD patients. The chi-square values for persistent cough, hemoptysis, chest pain, and dyspnea are 12.34, 7.89, 15.76, and 14.32, respectively, with all symptoms showing statistically significant associations (p-values of 0.0004, 0.0050, <0.0001, and 0.0002). These results indicate a strong relationship between NTM infections and the prevalence of these symptoms.

Discussion

This study elucidates the complex interplay between non-tuberculous mycobacteria (NTM) infections and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), emphasizing the role of histopathological findings in understanding these interactions. Our results indicate that among 112 COPD patients with NTM, 62% experienced persistent cough, 24% had hemoptysis, 69% reported chest pain, and 69% had dyspnea. These findings corroborate earlier research which has demonstrated that NTM infections are associated with a significant burden of respiratory symptoms in COPD patients, reinforcing the critical need for accurate diagnostic and management strategies.[15,21]

Histological examination revealed bronchiolar inflammation in 55.36% of patients, bronchiolectasis in 48.21%, peribronchiolar inflammation in 41.96%, and granuloma formation in 29.46%. These results are consistent with previous studies utilizing high-resolution computed tomography (HRCT) and histopathology to assess NTM infections. [22,23] Previous research has shown similar histological patterns, including bronchiolar inflammation and bronchiolectasis, which are linked to NTM infections and highlight the importance of histological assessments in managing these conditions.[24]

The chi-square analyses demonstrated significant associations between NTM infections and persistent cough ($\chi^2 = 12.34$, $p = 0.0004$), hemoptysis ($\chi^2 = 7.89$, $p = 0.0050$), chest pain ($\chi^2 = 15.76$, $p < 0.0001$), and dyspnea ($\chi^2 = 14.32$, $p = 0.0002$). These associations align with a study which underscores the heightened symptomatology in patients with NTM infections.[25] The statistical significance of these associations supports the assertion that NTM infections contribute to exacerbations in COPD patients and highlights the need for ongoing symptom management and tailored treatment plans.

Regarding treatment outcomes, 35.71% of patients showed improvement, 41.07% remained stable, and 23.21% experienced worsening conditions. This variability in treatment responses reflects findings from other study, which have also observed diverse outcomes in patients undergoing treatment for NTM infections.[26] Such variability underscores the necessity for personalized treatment approaches to optimize patient outcomes.

Overall, this study's results align with and extend previous findings, demonstrating the complex relationship between NTM infections and COPD and emphasizing the importance of detailed histological evaluation in managing these patients.

Conclusion

This study underscores the critical role of histological assessment in managing COPD patients with non-

tuberculous mycobacterial (NTM) infections. The findings reveal a significant association between NTM infections and various clinical symptoms such as persistent cough, hemoptysis, chest pain, and dyspnea, which were linked to distinctive histopathological changes including bronchiolectasis and inflammation. The comprehensive examination of lung tissues highlighted the complexity of NTM-related pulmonary pathology, reinforcing the need for precise diagnostic techniques. Enhanced histological evaluation not only aids in accurate diagnosis but also informs targeted treatment strategies, ultimately improving patient outcomes. As NTM infections become increasingly prevalent, integrating detailed histological assessment into clinical practice will be essential for advancing our understanding and management of these challenging conditions.

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