Brunei International Medical Journal

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF
THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH
AND
UNIVERSITI BRUNEI DARUSSALAM

Volume 16 13 December 2020 (27 Rabiulakhir 1442H)

IMAGING (CHEST RADIOGRAPHS) ABNORMALITIES IN PATIENTS WITH COVID-19 INFECTION IN BRUNEI DARUSSALAM.

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The Corona Virus Infectious Disease (COVID-19) caused by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Corona Virus 2 (SARS-COV-2) can affect any system but is primarily a respiratory disease. Manifestations can range from asymptomatic to severe, and chest radiological changes typically correlate with severity. Computed tomography scan is the best imaging, but is not widely available and plain chest radiography (CXR) remains the first line chest imaging. This study reports on CXR changes among patients with COVID-19 in Brunei Darussalam. **Materials and Methods:** All patient who had CXRs done were included in this study. Data were retrieved from a prospectively maintained database and anonymised for analyses. **Results**: Among 132 patients who had CXRs, 24 (18.2%) had radiological changes with mean age of 52.9 ± 11.3 years, which were significantly much older than those without CXR changes (35.9 ± 15.51 years). Of these 24 patients, 70.8% were men. Majority (70.8%) had symptoms on admission. Radiological changes occurred at a median of 3 days (range 0-8) of hospitalizations. Consolidation was the most common finding (62.5%), followed by ground glass opacities (37.5%). Twenty (87%) had resolution of radiological changes on CXRs at a median of 10 days (ranged from 9 to 16 days). Four patients developed progressive CXR changes consistent with acute respiratory distress syndrome requiring intubation with 3 going onto extracorporeal membrane oxygenation support (ECMO). The three patients on ECMO died with one successfully extubated and survive to discharge. Patients with radiological changes were significantly older (>40 years; OR 6.5) and have co-infections (OR 7.3) either at admission or during hospitalization on multivariate analysis. **Conclusions:** Common radiological manifestations include patchy consolidations and ground glass opacities. Changes were common at admission and can develop within 3 days of hospitalization. Older age groups (6.5 times) and those with co-infections (7.3 times) were more likely to develop chest xray abnormalities. Hence care monitoring and more aggressive management should be provided to these two groups.

Keywords: ARDS, Chest radiograph, Consolidation, COVID-19, Pneumonia, SARS-COV-2.

Brunei Int Med J. *2020;16:141-149*

ISSN 1560 5876 Print
ISSN 2079 3146 Online

Online version of the journal is available at www.bimjonline.com

Brunei International Medical Journal (BIMJ)
Official Publication of
The Ministry of Health
and
Universiti Brunei Darussalam

ISSN 1560-5876 Print
ISSN 2079-3146 Online

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INTRODUCTION

A novel coronavirus, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Corona Virus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) that causes Corona Virus Infectious Disease 2019 (COVID-19) was identified after a cluster of pneumonia of unknown cause was reported in Wuhan, China in December 2019.[1] Since, there has been rapid accumulation of data on this novel coronavirus which is rapidly evolving. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage on and as of 15th July 2020, there were 13,150,645 confirmed cases with 574,464

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death recorded worldwide.[2]

Early publications on COVID-19 radiological features have been largely focused on computed tomography (CT) scan findings due to its utilization as the first line imaging for screening of COVID-19 cases in China.[3-6] Patients with abnormal CT imaging typically showed ground glass opacities and consolidations. The reliance on CT as first line investigations for COVID-19 may place a significant burden for the radiology department especially in places with limited health resources. Furthermore, CT is not widely available and use of CT scan as a routine imaging for COVID-19 creates many barriers; infection control issues given that most centres have limited scanners and cannot dedicate a scanner solely for COVID-19 cases, chest radiograph (CXR) which can be portable remains the first line of radiological modality.[7] With this ongoing pandemic, it is crucial for clinicians to be familiar with COVID-19 features on CXRs.[8] Another modality that have been reported to be useful is ultrasound scan which is reported to show typical features but it's use is limited to assessment of pneumonia severity.[9] Furthermore, this modality is operator dependent.

Brunei Darussalam reported its first case of COVID-19 on 9th March 2020. In Brunei, all positive cases are admitted to the National Isolation Centre (NIC) for isolation and treatment. Contact tracing and testing were carried out for all contacts of confirmed cases and people with travel history. As of 27th July, Brunei Darussalam has remained free of new cases since 8th May 2020 and has recorded a total of 141 cases recorded, with 138 cases recovered and three deaths.[10] In our setting, CXRs is the imaging of choice as CT scan was not available in the designated hospital. This article reports on radiological abnormalities observed in patients with COVID-19 in Brunei Darussalam.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Patients

All patients confirmed to have COVID-19 with positive reverse transcriptase polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) for SARS-CoV-2 were admitted to the NIC for isolation and treatment. Patients on admission had routine investigations that included complete blood count with differential counts, liver and renal profiles, inflammatory marker C-reactive protein (CRP), hepatitis B, C, HIV screening, and CXR. Cultures (sputum, blood, and urine) were done according to symptoms and suspicions. During hospitalization patients underwent repeated investigations as indicated. CXRs were repeated if there were new or persistent fever, respiratory symptoms, and elevated inflammatory markers. All CXRs were done using portable X-ray machines and reporting was done by a single radiologist stationed in the hospital. The COVID-19 management protocol for all patients has been previously reported.[11].

From 9 March to 6 June 2020, a total of 141 patients were admitted to NIC with confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19. All patients were specially coded and their demographics and clinical details were recorded into our Brunei Health Information Management System (Bru-HIMS) database and accessible only to clinicians and nurses directly managing the patients and also those with given access priviledges. Inclusion criteria for the study were all patients with confirmed COVID-19 infection and who had CXR performed. Of these, 132 patients were identified from Bru-HIMS to had CXRs performed during their isolation at NIC and form the study population. Nine patients who had did not have CXR performed during their isolation and management period either due to contraindications for CXR or categorized as mild disease based on admissions criteria and pediatric patients who did not have CXR done were excluded from the study.

Data collection

Patients demographic, clinical data and the reported findings of the CXRs were extracted for analyses without patients identifiers (Bru-HIMS number, names or national identity record number) but with their special COVID-19 coding for identification. Patients were divided into two groups; those with normal CXRs and those with abnormal CXRs reports for comparison.

Statistical analysis

Data analyses were performed using the SPSS IBM Version 23.0. Comparisons for continuous variables were carried out using Mann -Whitney test and for categorical variables, Fisher Exact test or Chi-Square test were used where appropriate. Level of significance was taken when p value was <0.05. Categorical variables significant on univariate analysis were entered into multivariate analysis and ORs were generated for significant results.

RESULTS

Patient characteristics

Of the 132 patients with CXR performed, there were only 24 (18.2%) patients who had abnormal CXR reports with radiological changes. These 24 patients with radiological changes were significantly older compared to those without radiological changes (Table I: 52.9 ± 11.3 years vs 35.93 ± 15.51 years respectively; *p<0.001*).

Majority of the 24 patients with radiological changes were men (n=17; 70.8%). The nationality breakdown was as follow: Bruneian (n=18, 75.0%), Bangladeshi (n=2, 8.3%), Filipino (n=1, 4.2%), Egyptian (n=1, 4.2%), Indian (n=1, 4.2%) and Nepalese (n=1, 4.2%). The most common comorbidities were hypertension (37.5%) and diabetes mellitus (16.7%). Eleven (45.8%) patients had travel history as the source of infections (Table I). Majority (n=17; 70.8%) had symptoms on admission. The most common presentations among patients with radiological changes was fever followed by coughing. During hospitalization, 37.5% (n=9) had documented desaturation (saturation <92% on room air) requiring oxygen supplementation. Twenty patients (83.3%) had up trending CRP with CXR changes. Eight patients had normal CRP on admissions.

Six patients were transferred to the ICU due to clinical deterioration and intubation and ventilatory supported were required in four patients (3 men; 1 woman). Of the four who were intubated and ventilated, three male patients died of severe septicemia. The remaining female patient who was intubated recovered and was successfully extubated from ventilator support. This patients and the other 20 patients with abnormal CXRs all recovered and were discharged alive. The 108 patients with normal CXRs and the 9 patients who did not have CXRs performed all recovered and got discharged home.

Radiological features

Eleven patients of the total 24 patients who had reported radiological abnormalities during hospitalisation, originally had normal CXRs on admission but developed radiological changes at a median of 3 days (range 0-8 days) of hospitalizations. Details of the CXRs changes/ abnormalities are shown in Table II. Consolidation, consisting mainly of bronchial pattern were the most common finding (62.5%), followed by ground glass opacities (37.5%). Excluding the three patients who had died, 52.4% had complete resolution of CXRs abnormalities at a median of 10 days (ranged from 9 to 16 days) at discharge. Of those who had residue abnormalities on CXR at discharge, all had complete resolution at follow up CXRs. Patients had a median of 4 CXRs (range 2 to 77). Figures 1 showed a patient with (a) normal admission CXR and (b&c) developed changes during hospitalization. Figures 2 show a patient who had (a) abnormal CXR of admission which (b) resolved during

Table I: COVID-19 patients' demographics, clinical symptoms, blood and radiological investigations with univariate comparisons between those with and those without CXR changes.

Variables		*With radiological changes (n=24)*	*With no radiological changes (n=108)*	*P values*
Age (mean ± SD in years)		52.9 ± 11.3	35.9 ± 15.51	***<0.001***
Age < 40 years		3	69 (63.9%)	***<0.001***
Age ≥ 40 years		21	39 (36.1%)	
Gender	Male	17 (70.8%)	65 (60.2%)	0.331
	Female	7 (29.2%)	43 (39.8%)	
Comorbid conditions	Overall (Yes)	14 (58.3)	32 (29.6)	***0.008***
	Diabetes (Yes)	3 (12.5)	6 (5.6)	0.222
	Hypertension (Yes)	8 (33.3)	13 (12.0)	***0.010***
	Dyslipidemia (Yes)	5 (20.8)	16 (14.8)	0.466
	Cardiac (Yes)	0 (0)	6 (5.6)	0.237
	Pulmonary (Yes)	2 (8.3)	4 (3.7)	0.325
Symptoms at admission (Yes)		18 (75.0)	71 (65.7)	0.381
Symptoms overall (Yes)		20 (83.3)	80 (74.1)	0.338
Symptoms (Yes)	Fever	8 (33.3)	30 (27.8)	0.587
	Cough	10 (41.7)	45 (41.7)	1.000
	Rhinorrhea	4 (16.7)	27 (25.0)	0.384
	Dyspnea	1 (4.2)	2 (1.9)	0.491
	Diarrhea	2 (8.3)	5 (4.6)	0.464
	Headache	1 (4.2)	10 (9.3)	0.414
	Myalgia	4 (16.7)	12 (11.1)	0.451
	Sore throat	3 (12.5)	8 (7.4)	0.414
Ct at diagnosis *	<26.0	11 (55.0)	59 (57.3)	0.850
	>26.0	9 (45.0)	44 (42.7)	
Serum albumin (gm/dL) **	<38.8	16 (76.2)	33 (32.7)	***<0.001***
	>38.8	5 (23.8)	68 (67.3)	
Lymphocytes ***	<1.82	16 (66.7)	53 (52.0)	0.193
	>1.82	8 (33.3)	49 (48.0)	
Neutrophils ***	<3.74	14 (58.3)	65 (63.7)	0.623
	>3.74	10 (41.7)	37 (36.3)	
Neutrophil/lymphocyte ratio ***	<2.55	15 (62.5)	72 (70.6)	0.441
	>2.55	9 (37.5)	30 (29.4)	
Overall coinfections	Yes	10 (41.7)	5 (4.6)	***<0.001***
	No	14 (58.3)	103 (95.4)	

Ct: Cycle threshold for RT-PCR analysis (surrogate marker for viral load, inverse correlation. Ct of 40.0 is negative).
*data available for 123 patients
**data available for 122 patients
*** data available for 126 patients

hospitalization. Figures 3a&b showed CXRs of a patient who had progressive changes without resolution.

Comparisons between COVID-19 patients with and without radiological changes

Based on univariate analysis, the 24 COVID-19 patients with radiological changes were older, more likely to have comorbidities especially hypertension, had lower serum albumin and with co-infections at admission (Table II). However, only age and presence of bacterial coinfections remained statistically significant for association with abnormal CXRs on multivariate analysis, with OR of 6.5 and 7.3 respectively (Table III).

DISCUSSION

Our study showed that CXRs were abnormal

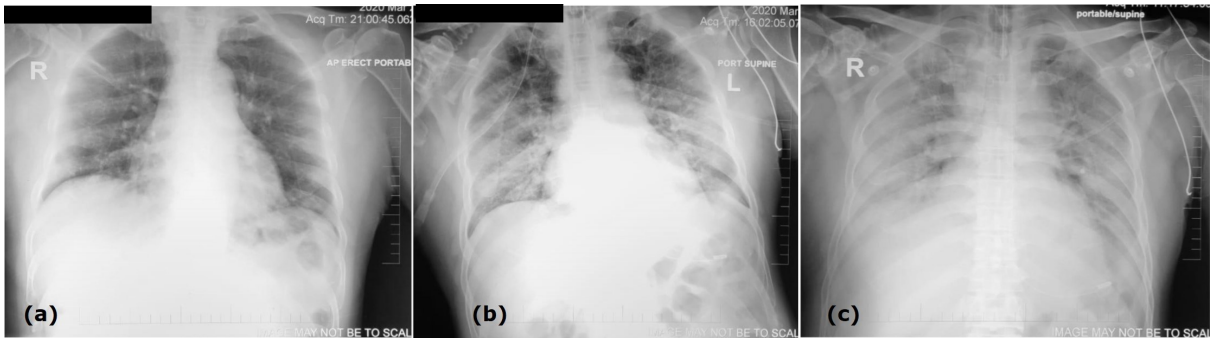
Table II: Details of COVID-19 patients with radiological changes (N=24).

Characteristics		*n* (%)
CXR on admission	Normal	11 (45.8%)
	Abnormal	13 (54.2%)
Median duration to developing radiological changes if normal at admission (days)		3 (0-8)
Type of parenchymal abnormality	Consolidation	15 (62.5%)
	Ground glass opacities	9 (37.5%)
Laterality	Right lung	10 (41.7%)
	Left lung	5 (20.8%)
	Bilateral lung	9 (37.5%)
Complete resolution of CXR on discharge *	Yes	11 (52.4%)
	No	10 (47.6%)
Complete resolution at follow up*	Yes	21 (100%)

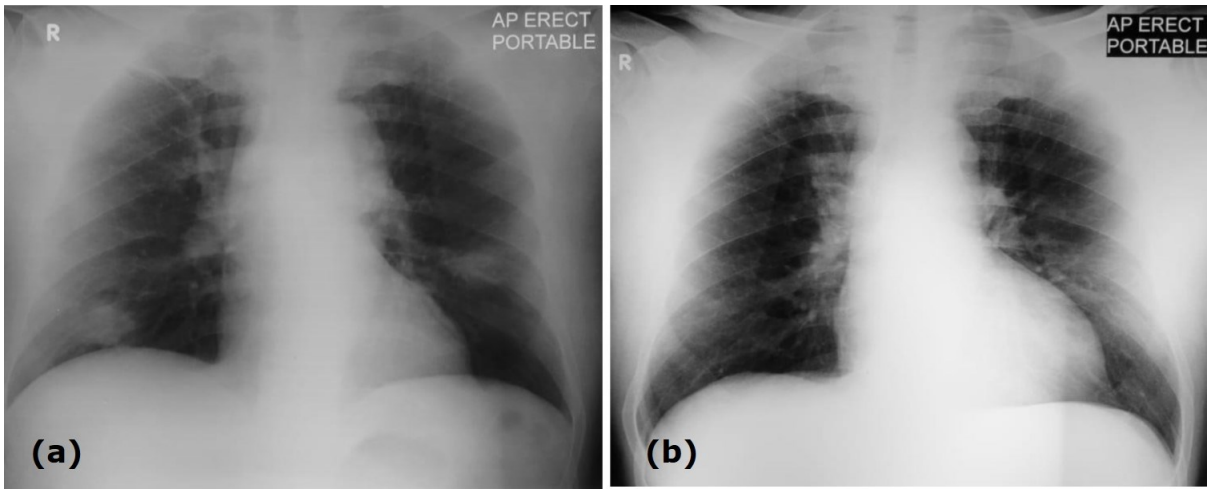
Note: * excluding patients who have died (n=3)

in almost one in five (18.2%) COVID-19 patients, and of these, almost half (8.3%) had abnormal CXR on admission with the remainders developing radiological abnormalities during hospitalization. The changes occurred at a median of 3 days (range 0-8 days) after admission. Radiological changes are more common in the first week of illness (median 4 -5 days of illness with most within two weeks) by which findings are less unless patients' conditions continue to deteriorate.[12] However, if we had included patients who did not have CXRs done, mostly those categorized as mild disease and unlikely to have radiological abnormalities, the incidence would be lower. One study from Italy on CXR changes (N=240) reported abnormal CXRs in 75% of patients, with changes seen within 2 days (63.3%), 3-5 days (72%), 6-9 days (81.2%) and beyond 9 days (83.9%).[13] To date, studies reporting on radiological changes including the Italian studies have mainly been on symptomatic to ill patients, in which large proportion are likely to have imaging abnormalities. Furthermore, many of the earlier reports especially from China had used CT scan as the imaging of choice contributed by delay in laboratory diagnosis. CT findings reported features that were characteristics to COVID-19.[3-7] CT is more sensitive than CXR and are reported to detect changes even before symptoms occur [12] and had resulted in higher rates of finding imaging abnormalities. Therefore, the incidence reported in the literature are much higher than what we have reported. Our study included all confirmed COVID-19 patients with majority having mild or no symptoms and we had only used CXRs.

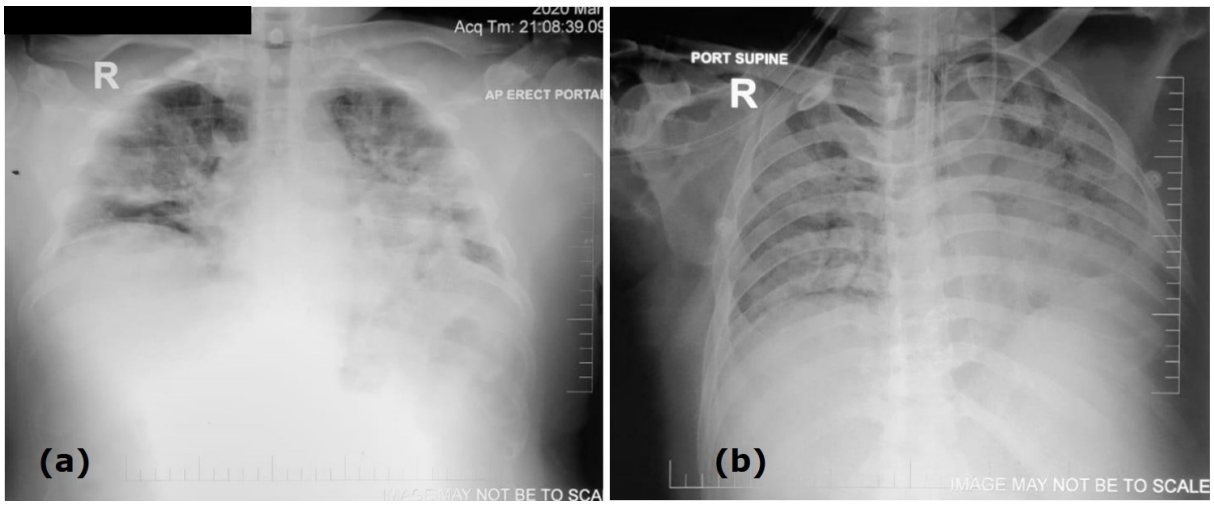
The most common abnormalities reported in our study were consolidations (62.5%) as shown in Figure 1b and 3a, and ground glass opacities (37.5%) as shown in figure 2a, similar to what have been previously reported in the literature.[13,14] An Italian study on CXRs changes reported that ground glass opacities were the most common (68.8%), followed by reticular alteration (62.7%), and consolidation (39.4%). Alterations were bilateral in 73.3%. Upper, middle, and lower fields were involved in 36.7%, 79.4%, and 87.8%, respectively.[13] Lesions were peripheral in 49.4%, central in 11.1%, or both in 39.4%. Upper fields and central zones were significantly less involved (p <0.01).[13] Another study from Italy reported similar findings.[15] Most of the changes with exception of patients who had rapid progressions were mainly mild consolidations that were patchy in distributions. However, in CT imaging, these changes observed in CXRs will be more severe. CXR changes can be rapid as seen in patient in Figures 1, where the admission CXR was normal and within a few days had progressed to significant consolidations and ARDS, needing intubation and ventilatory



Figures 1: a) Normal admission CXR which rapidly progressed over the following three days (b and c) (patient died of ARDS, endocarditis and septicemia).



Figures 2: (a) Abnormal admission CXR, which (b) normalised before discharge.



Figures 3: Patient with abnormal admission CXR (a) which progressed into acute respiratory distress syndrome with white out of both lungs (b) (patient died of ARDS).

Table III: Multivariate comparisons of COVID-19 patients with and those without CXR changes.

Variables	Odd ratio	P value	95% CI
Age (39 or less vs. ≥40)	**6.509**	***0.011***	**1.633 – 42.229**
Presence of overall bacterial co-infection	**7.293**	***0.007***	**1.800 – 40.451**
Absence of any comorbid condition	0.102	0.684	0.170 – 3.586
Absence of Hypertension	0.032	0.859	0.147 – 4.934
Serum albumin (gm/dL) (<38.8 vs. >38.8)	2.703	0.100	0.098 – 1.225

support. Development of lung bullae complicated by pneumothorax have also been reported and tended to occur in patient with severe disease as in one of our patients.[16] Among the sides of lungs affected, the right lung was more commonly affected with more than a third having bilateral involvements. Other studies have also reported bilateral involvement to be common, especially the lower lobes.[12,14] Peripheral involvements are more common than central involvement but generally, any part of the lungs can be affected. Radiological changes in COVID-19 patients based on CT scans have been categorised into five phases from pre-symptomatic to recovery (Table IV).[17]

Just over a third of patients had documented desaturation (<92%) associated with CXR changes. In contrast, increase in serum CRP level was noted in over 80% of patients who had CXR changes. CXR scores (changes) have been shown to correlate with several clinical and laboratory variables such as positive correlation with CRP, lactate dehydrogenase, and fever duration, and a negative correlation with oxygen saturation.[15] CXR findings are in line with those reported by CT scan studies.[15]

All our patients with CXR changes were categorized as moderate to severe and were treated with lopinavir/ritonanvir, some with hydroxychloroquine, which was later dropped from our treatment protocol due to cardiac side-effects.[11] Apart from the 3 patients who died, all radiological changes resolved at follow up. It is possible that some of the resolution might have occurred earlier and this was not captured as follow up CXRs after initial ones were done depending on condition of patients and not follow a set interval. In our case, once a patient improved clinically and biochemically, we did not necessarily proceed with a repeat CXR until closer to days of planned discharge. COVID-19 is reported to have long lasting consequences on the lung with chronic changes that include scarring and bronchiectasis, especially in patient with severe disease and pre-existing lung diseases such as chronic obstructive pulmonary airway disease.[18,19] To date, after more than 2 months since the last patient was discharged, all surviving patients have not presented to any government clinics or hospital for any respiratory problem. However, without doing CT scan imaging, mild residual lung damage that may not produce clinical symptoms can be missed.

Comparing patients with and without CXR changes, patients with changes were more likely to be older, have comorbid conditions in particular hypertension, lower serum albumin on admission, and develop overall bacterial co-infections. CXR changes correlat-

Table IV: Stages of radiological changes.

	Ultra-Early (1)	**Early (2)**	**Rapid progression (3)**	**Consolidation (4)**	**Dissipation (resolution) (5)**
Findings	-Prior to symptoms onset -Usually within 1-2 weeks of symptoms onset -Throat R-PCR +ve and IgM -ve	-Symptomatic (within 1-3 days) -Histology show congestion of alveolar capillaries resulting in alveolar and interlobular interstitial oedema	-Symptomatic (within 3-7 days) -Escalation in the hyperinflammatory response, Fibrous extensions that connect the alveoli begin to develop	-This phase coincides with the second week of clinical symptoms -The vascular congestion diminishes, and fibrosis predominate	-This phase occurs ~2-3 weeks after the initial symptomatic presentation -Healing and repair response within the lung
Radiological changes (Base on CT scan)	-Subpleural (typically scattered, multiple and bilateral ground glass opacities)	-progression of stage 1 changes with development of irregular interlobular septa	-progression with development of consolidations and air bronchogram may be visible	-improvement with decrease in size and densities of consolidation	-improvement with resolution, reduction in consolidation without or without reticular, bronchial or interlobular septae thickening

ed with severity of disease and some of the factors mentioned above have been associated with disease severity such as age[12], and comorbid conditions.[20] Being treated is just a consequence of disease severity, hence CXR changes.

There are several limitations with our study. First, our overall sample size and patients with radiological abnormalities were small and hence may affect our results. However, the sample size is the total number of patients and hence representative for the whole nation. Second, we only used CXRs and it is known that CT scan is more sensitive. Despite this, as discussed earlier on, it is impractical to consider CT scan as the modality of choice given that it may not be widely available and logistics issues such as arranging transport and porterage between isolation room/centre and radiological suite, which will create problems of infection control and safety, not to mention the disinfection of the CT suite and corridor post scanning. Furthermore CT scans may not available in the designated hospitals/Isolation centres for COVID-19. In addition, CT scan will pick radiological changes that may clinically be not relevant. Third, we did not do CXRs on a set regular interval which will mean that exact times of development and resolution of radiological abnormalities were estimates at best. However, despite this our findings are useful for daily practice in the management of COVID-19 patients during this pandemic especially in settings where the only imaging modality is CXRs.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, CXRs abnormalities were seen in almost one in five patients with COVID-19, and of these, almost half had abnormalities at admissions and the remainder at a median of three days after admissions. Similar to what have been reported in the literature, common abnormalities were consolidations and ground glass opacities. Most of the changes were mild but can develop rapidly, and these patients typically require intensive care and ventilatory support. The longer the patients remain unwell and radiological changes progress, they tended not to do well often complicated by hospital acquired infections. It is important for clinicians to be familiar with common radiological changes on CXR so that patients can be managed appropriately.

DECLARATION

The authors declared that there is no conflict of interest and no financial conflict.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to acknowledge the tiredless effort of all the doctors, nurses, allied health professionals and support staff looking after COVID-19 patients at National Isolation Centre in Tutong during this pandemic.

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