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Sleep Studies and Polysomnography: The Role of Respiratory Technicians in Diagnosing Sleep Apnea

Meshal Anwar Alghamdi[1], Majdi Fazi almutairi[2], Abdulaziz Ahmed Alanazi[3] Ahmed Ali Alkhelb[4], Fahad Khaled Binrobiq[5] and Omar Khulaif Alanazi[6]

[1] Corresponding Author, Respiratory therapist, Meshl.alghamdi.107@gmail.com, Ministry of National Guard-Health Affairs

[2,3,4,5,6] Respiratory Therapist, Ministry of National Guard-Health Affairs

Abstract

Sleep disorders describe a group of conditions that affect the ability to sleep well on a regular basis. Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) is common among sleep disorders and is defined as a disorder of breathing during sleep, characterized by repeated episodes of complete or partial obstruction of the upper airway (UA) that are usually associated with a reduction in blood oxygen saturation. The likelihood of developing sleep apnea is also high in patients with cardiovascular disease, hypertension, stroke, diabetes, obesity, asthma, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) among others. A sleep study is a test that records how a person sleeps and it is indicated if the person has symptoms suggestive of OSA. Polysomnography is the unique study used to diagnose and characterize these abnormalities. Respiratory technologists are graduates in Respiratory Therapy and have received formal training in polysomnography.

During the preparation of the patient for the study, electrodes and sensors are placed to register the electroencephalogram, electrooculogram, electromyogram, electrocardiogram, nasal and oral airflow, chest wall movement, blood oxygen concentration, and body position, among other parameters. The test is carried out with continuous monitoring by a technician who is in direct contact with the patient. Polysomnography allows the identification of different sleep patterns and the calculation of the apnea-hypopnea index. Patients with an apnea-hypopnea index with three or more events per hour accompanied by symptoms or with an apnea-hypopnea index of more than 5 events per hour without symptoms should be considered candidates for treatment.

Keywords: Respiratory, Technicians, Diagnosis of Sleep Apnea, Polysomnography

1. Introduction to Sleep Disorders

Sleep is an essential parametre that plays a vital role in various human lung functions. Any deficiency or compulsion in adequate sleep may lead to various disorders, including refractory pulmonary diseases, such as obstructive sleep apnea (OSA). OSA is a significant sleep disease that occurs typically in people who are overweight and obese, with the oxygen

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level in the blood dropping to 75% in extreme cases. The disorder is caused by a momentary cessation of breathing and affects up to 4% of men and 2% of women worldwide. Regular instances of OSA increase the likelihood of heart attack, stroke, irregular heartbeat, and diabetes (Shrivastava et al., 2014). Sleep disorders are a widespread problem affecting millions and include abnormalities or disruptions in sleep-wake rhythms, such as obstructive sleep apnea (Smily JeyaJothi et al., 2022). They influence an individual's health and well-being by reducing physical and mental performance and have been linked to fatal road accidents and workplace disasters. Accurate, non-invasive automatic detection of apneic sounds in recorded sleep signals therefore plays a crucial role in diagnosing OSA.

2. Understanding Sleep Apnea

Sleep apnea afflicts approximately 3% to 7% of the adult population, with prevalence increasing significantly in the presence of conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, obesity, and stroke. The disorder is characterized by frequent interruptions of breathing during sleep, leading to pronounced daytime sleepiness. Individuals may unknowingly cease breathing hundreds of times per night, resulting in heightened cardiovascular risks, stroke, diabetes, and other morbidities. Of the three principal types—obstructive, central, and mixed—obstructive sleep apnea arises from mechanical blockage of the airway despite continued respiratory effort; central sleep apnea originates from diminished neural drive to the respiratory muscles; and mixed sleep apnea, a less common form, combines features of both. Persisting in the absence of a diagnosis, sleep apnea can escalate to life-threatening proportions (Penzel et al., 2020).

2.1. Types of Sleep Apnea

Sleep apnea is a common sleep disorder affecting millions worldwide, characterized by breathing cessations lasting at least 10 seconds and typically occurring sixty or more times a night (Florencia Angellotti et al., 2023). It is categorized into three types: obstructive (OSA), central (CSA), and mixed apnea. OSA is caused by a blockage of the upper airway, often due to the tongue or a bulky uvula, and is the primary type encountered. Risk factors include obesity, micrognathia, and macroglossia. CSA is less frequent and attributed to the temporary interruption of the respiratory command, often secondary to stroke, opioid overdose, brain damage, or heart failure and arrhythmias. Mixed apnea exhibits features of both obstructive and central types (Smily JeyaJothi et al., 2022).

2.2. Symptoms and Risk Factors

The main symptom of obstructive sleep apnea is daily sleepiness. Other common symptoms include snoring, restless sleep, low concentration, and fatigue. The clinical evaluation routine requires active participation from the patient and family, emphasizing accurate recording of the main complaint. Commonly used sleepiness scales, such as Epworth or Stanford, are

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applied (Maria Allenstein Gondim et al., 2015). The physical examination should include measurements such as body mass index (BMI), which, combined with cephalometry, can predict the likelihood of sleep obstructive apnea syndrome (SOAS). Sleep disorders have been linked to pulmonary hypertension, high blood pressure, and an elevated risk of myocardial infarction (Lima, 2011).

3. The Importance of Sleep Studies

Physicians commonly order sleep studies to investigate the root causes of poor sleep quality, such as insomnia and other sleep disorders. Patients suspected of obstructive sleep apnea undergo polysomnographic examinations at accredited sleep clinics. Polysomnography is considered the gold standard for studying sleep problems. It records various physiological parameters throughout the night while the patient sleeps, including respiratory effort, oxygen saturation, air flow, brain activity, and muscle movements, which collectively provide a comprehensive depiction of sleep-wake states. Based on the data, clinicians can identify the nature and severity of sleep apnea and formulate appropriate treatment plans.

The increasing prevalence of obstructive sleep apnea has elevated the demand for qualified diagnostic personnel. Registered respiratory therapists (RRTs) often fulfill this role as sleep technicians due to their relevant training and credentials.

3.1. Overview of Sleep Studies

Sleep studies form an integral part of Sleep Medicine and are considered the standard in the diagnosis and characterization of sleep-disordered breathing (Shrivastava et al., 2014). Sleep apnea is a common condition that, left untreated, can lead to various complications. On average, about ten percent of the population experiences disrupted breathing during sleep. The severity of the condition ranges from rare interruptions (less than 15 times per hour) to more than 60 times per hour or constant airway blockage. Sleep apnea is defined as complete or partial blockage of the upper airway lasting at least 10 seconds (Smily JeyaJothi et al., 2022). It results in fragmented sleep and reduced oxygen supply to the brain and heart.

3.2. Indications for Sleep Studies

Sleep disorders, defined as a group of disorders characterized by alterations in the sleep pattern, are highly prevalent conditions that may manifest with excessive daytime sleepiness, lack of concentration or snoring, and can have a substantial impact on an affected person's quality of life and health (Florencia Angellotti et al., 2023). Obstructive sleep apnea syndrome (OSA) is a sleep-related breathing disorder characterized by upper airway limitation, generating total or partial airflow cessation during sleep, and affects at least 2–4% of the adult population. Several screening instruments for sleep apnea exist, including the Berlin questionnaire, the STOP-BANG questionnaire and the Epworth Sleepiness Scale.

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Sleep studies are indicated in patients with suspected sleep apnea. The tests include overnight polysomnography (PSG) or portable monitoring (PM), which is recommended during routine sleep apnea evaluation due to its accessibility and lower cost. PSG is the gold standard for the diagnosis of OSA and allows for a comprehensive assessment of sleep and additional events associated with sleep interruption. Respiratory thermistors and nasal pressure transducers are the main sensors used for airflow detection in PSG, while PM studies mostly use nasal pressure transducers. PSG enables data collection to be correlated with sleep stages and the patient's body position, although this is not possible in PM.

4. Polysomnography Explained

A polysomnography (PSG) primarily diagnoses obstructive sleep apnea but can also screen for other sleep disorders. It records brain waves, oxygen levels, heart rate, breathing patterns, eye and leg movements, and chest and abdominal movements during sleep. The procedure requires an overnight stay at a sleep laboratory with electrodes placed on the chest, scalp, face, and limbs. The collected data determine apnea or hypopnea events and reveal disruptions in sleep stages experienced throughout the night (Shrivastava et al., 2014) (Penzel et al., 2020).

4.1. What is Polysomnography?

Polysomnography (PSG) serves as the cornerstone in sleep medicine for the evaluation of obstructive and central sleep apnoea as well as myriad other disorders characterized by abnormal respiration during sleep (Penzel et al., 2020). An extensive array of physiological parameters receive continuous recording throughout the traditional PSG, with sleep stages subsequently classified. The data accrued underpin the stark distinction between physiological and pathological phenomena, define the extent of each abnormality, and lay the foundation for personalised treatment (Young An et al., 2022). Atmospheric parameters surrounding the patient rather than the patient themselves also became integral to multi-night PSG iterations developed to constrain cost and travel. The tasks encompassing setup, data acquisition, and equipment maintenance for sleep studies find specialist execution through Respiratory Technical Officers (RTOs), also known as Polysomnographic Technicians (PMTs) in certain global regions.

4.2. Equipment Used in Polysomnography

Several types of equipment are used during a polysomnography. A computer with software designed for polysomnography is essential to acquire signals and analyse the study after. The sleep study requires amplifiers, filters, and electrodes to monitor different physiological parameters. The technical equipment used for a sleep study will depend on the particular centre where the study is going to be performed, but there are some essential instruments that need to be included. One constant in any monitoring situation is proper grounding

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connection. Electrical grounding is essential for reducing the acoustic noise level, and the measurements should be taken on the computer, the amplifiers, and the recording apparatus. The grounding circuit must be separated from other instruments in the vicinity of the experiment. During a sleep study, the airflow can be measured using a pressure transducer to monitor nasal air pressure, or thermistors to detect air temperature variations. Snoring is a breathing practice during sleep characterized by breath sounds caused by the turbulent airflow through the upper airway. To monitor this situation, a microphone near the neck or upper airway can be used. The initial idea behind oximetry technology was to develop a sensor capable of estimating the oxygen level in the blood in a non-invasive continuous fashion, which could monitor the oxygen desaturation during respiratory events during sleep. The pulse oxygenation device can record blood oxygen saturation due to the variation in the light absorption of oxygenated and de-oxygenated haemoglobin. It uses red and infrared light to assess changes in the oxygen saturation and pulse rate. During sleep, it is important to continuously monitor cardiac frequency and electrocardiograph information. This wrong condition is called bradycardia and tachycardia during sleep and can lead to severe or life-threatening disorders. Cardiac activity can be measured by electrocardiography (ECG) or by Plethysmography techniques. Muscle activity is recorded using electromyography or EMG, which records the electrical activity generated by the contraction of motor units and muscle fibres. Disposable electrodes are used in clinical sleep monitoring to obtain the sleep muscle activity signal with relatively strong amplitude, which usually reduces the electrode attachment requirements. The motion of the body while sleeping is monitored using an accelerometer, which detects the motion of the bearer during the study. A strain gauge sensing a change in resistance due to the stretching of a metal coil or tube is placed around the chest and the abdomen to measure the respiratory effort and can be used to detect apnoeic events easily. During a sleep study, a score is recorded from the transducers and sensors to indicate the state of the subject. The procedure is accomplished if the subject is recorded every 20 seconds during the session. These sensors are positioned on the subject to register the temperature of the body, the movement of the chest and abdomen, the airflow, the eye movement and the activation of the typed musculature. The sensors are placed with an elastic band around chest and abdomen. At the same time, nasal cannula linked by a transducer is inserted in the nose; in the other hand, the eyes of the subject usually have a set of electrodes, arranged in the corners. The previously commented musculature is obtained using two other electrodes commonly located in the chin (Florencia Angellotti et al., 2023).

5. Role of Respiratory Technicians

A registered respiratory therapist is the preferred practitioner to conduct overnight sleep studies and polysomnography. Performing sleep studies demands expertise in collection, storage, and presentation of data within a patient facility setting. Respiratory therapists are skilled in related procedures such as arterial blood gas analysis, oximetry, and lung-function

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testing, which positions them to serve effectively alongside physicians in the evaluation of sleep disorders like sleep apnea during diagnostic sleep studies.

For oral appliance therapy to succeed, screening by a sleep specialist is vital to confirm the presence of obstructive sleep apnea. Integrating sleep physicians and dental sleep medicine specialists through linked sleep studies and objective outcome measurements supports the provision of safe and effective care.

5.1. Training and Qualifications

A respiratory therapist is a specialized healthcare practitioner who provides care for patients with cardiopulmonary disorders, such as sleep apnea (Shrivastava et al., 2014). Respiratory therapists can obtain credentials by graduating from accredited training programs offered at the certificate, associate's degree, or bachelor's degree levels; programs typically last from two to six years. All states and the District of Columbia require respiratory therapists to obtain licensure by passing the National Board for Respiratory Care (NBRC) Registered Respiratory Therapist (RRT) examination (Bianchi et al., 2014). Respiratory therapists generally work in hospital, clinic, or homecare settings; an increasing number, however, are now specialists in the diagnosis and management of sleep respiratory disorders, and serve as leading providers of sleep apnea treatment-services. Respiratory therapists who work in the field of sleep medicine assess, treat, and operate monitoring equipment used to obtain sleep studies or "polysomnograms". As polysomnographic technologists, respiratory therapists carry out responsibilities including the performance of sleep-studies, the titration of continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) and other pressure devices, and the general setup, calibration, and maintenance of specialized laboratory diagnostic equipment.

5.2. Responsibilities During Sleep Studies

A respiratory technician is responsible for at least three aspects of the study: preparation, data acquisition and patient monitoring. Preparation includes data-entry, sensor and electrode set-up and sensor placement. Since technicians often have little background in polysomnography, detailed sensor-placement guides are useful for setting-up the equipment and in avoiding common sources of error. During the study, the patient's physiological parameters are continuously monitored along with the recording equipment. The technician should visit the patient regularly to make sure that the equipment is functioning normally and to address additional patient needs (Florencia Angellotti et al., 2023).

6. Conducting a Sleep Study

Conducting a sleep study necessitates the placement of multiple electrodes on the patient to monitor several physiological variables throughout the night. The patient is then observed as they sleep to identify the potential occurrence of respiratory disturbances during sleep. A respiratory technician supports the attending physician by collecting data through sensors

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distributed across the patient. Sleep studies monitor brain waves, oxygen levels, heart rate and rhythm, breathing, as well as eye and leg movements. Numerous physiological shifts transpire as an individual transitions between various sleep stages, including waking, rapid eye movement, and non-rapid eye movement. The five stages of sleep encompass waters between wakefulness and sleep onset (stage W), light sleep (stages N1 and N2), deep sleep (stage N3), and rapid eye movement (REM). Comprehensive sleep studies prove timely, demanding meticulous attention from respiratory technicians to determine if sufficient data have been captured.

6.1. Preparation for the Study

Before a sleep study begins, the respiratory technician verifies the patient's BMI and neck size, as these parameters correlate with sleep apnea risk. After arriving at the sleep center, the patient provides a sleeping history. The technician measures the patient's blood pressure, height, and weight and fits the appropriate CPAP mask if the patient already uses one. The technician also reviews medical history and inquiries to detect the presence of any other sleep disorders. The patient changes into loose-fitting, two-piece clothing, and the technician applies electrodes according to the principles of polysomnography, aiming to capture data on the brain, eyes, muscles, and heart during sleep. Once the leads are in place, the patient lies down on the bed to commence the study. The technician activates devices to measure leg movements and temperature and to monitor blood oxygen saturation and airflow. A snore sensor and microphone are attached to the neck, and the odorous nasal cannula is positioned in the nostrils. Following these preparations, the technician provides the patient with headphones and a blindfold, then retires to the observation room to commence data recording and observation (Shrivastava et al., 2014) (Yağanoğlu et al., 2017).

6.2. Monitoring and Data Collection

Following placement of the sensors, the patient prepares to sleep while the respiratory technician monitors various physiological signals throughout the night. The technician ensures equipment functionality, manages the on-line recording system, and maintains a log of significant events that might interfere with data analysis. Sleep studies also provide an essential source of information for establishing other diagnoses, including cardiovascular, neurological, respiratory and movement disturbances.

Skin electrodes attached to the scalp and face are connected to a polysomnograph that monitors electroencephalographic brain potentials, electromyographic activity in the submentalis and lower limbs, and electrooculographic eye movements. Additionally, electrocardiographic heart rate and rhythm, nasal and oral airflows, thoracic and abdominal respiratory effort, snoring, body position, peripheral arterial oxygen saturation and pulse rate are monitored (Florencia Angellotti et al., 2023).

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7. Interpreting Polysomnography Results

Sleep is a vital component of life, and disruptions in sleep patterns can significantly impact health. Sleep disorders, ranging from chronic insomnia to sleepwalking, affect individuals of all ages. Among these, sleep apnea a condition characterized by pauses in breathing during sleep is particularly prevalent and often diagnosed through specialized studies conducted in sleep laboratories.

Polysomnography, the recording of physiological functions during sleep, stands as the gold standard for diagnosing sleep apnea. This comprehensive monitoring enables the detailed analysis of breathing, heart rate, oxygen metabolism, brain activity, and muscle tone throughout the sleep cycle.

Respiratory therapists, typically credentialed by the National Board for Respiratory Care, play an essential role in administering sleep studies. They are adept at operating complex polysomnographic equipment and managing the intricate paperwork associated with studies. Their responsibilities include attaching multiple electrodes and sensors to the patient and continuously monitoring the measurements to ensure data integrity.

Preparing patients for sleep studies requires the technician to follow strict protocols while remaining sensitive to individual needs, especially given that many patients experience anxiety or fatigue. Once the patient is prepared and the equipment functions as intended, the technician remains vigilant throughout the overnight recording to verify that signals remain valid. Upon completion, the collected data is compiled into a comprehensive report for interpretation by the attending physician.

Analyzing the compiled polysomnographic data allows clinicians to assess the patient s sleep architecture, including the cyclical patterns of rapid eye movement and non-rapid eye movement phases. Within the continuous recording, periods of apnea or hypopnea pauses or reductions in airflow of at least 10 seconds can be identified and correlated with physiological changes such as blood oxygen levels, heart rate, and chest movements (Shrivastava et al., 2014). Detailed evaluation of these parameters aids in accurately identifying obstructive, central, or mixed sleep apnea events.

7.1. Understanding Sleep Stages

The cycles of sleep are classified into REM (rapid eye movement) and non-REM stages; each cycle lasts between 90 and 110 minutes. Non-REM stages include N1 (drowsiness), N2 (the first stage of real sleep), and N3 (deep sleep). As the night progresses, the length of non-REM cycles shortens through the later stages of sleep, with REM stages lasting longer; most deep–sleep phases occur in the first part of the night (Wang et al., 2022). In the case of patients with sleep disorders, atypical sleep architecture provides important diagnostic information.

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Identifying these stages is essential for interpreting both sleep structure and electroencephalography (EEG) abnormalities (Shrivastava et al., 2014).

7.2. Identifying Apnea Events

Early sleep research identified body movements during sleep as indicators for determining sleep stages and apnea events, a concept that remains relevant in polysomnography (Penzel et al., 2020). Respiratory technicians assess whether technical data align with normal nightly activity and monitor the number of apnea events occurring during observed breathing pauses. An apnea episode is recorded when the peak signal from the oronasal pressure sensor decreases by at least 90% of the amplitude for 10 seconds or longer (D. Moscoso-Barrera et al., 2022). Hypopneas are identified when the amplitude reduction is between 30% and 90% over a 10-second interval, accompanied by a 3% or greater arterial oxygen desaturation. Analysis proceeds with sliding 5-second windows shifting every 0.5 seconds; each amplitude is compared to the baseline from the preceding epoch. A sustained amplitude reduction exceeding 90% for more than 10 seconds confirms an apnea event. Differentiation between central and obstructive apneas relies on respiratory effort measurements: if effort signals drop below 20% of their maximum over a period exceeding 10 seconds, the event is classified as central; otherwise, it is obstructive. When airflow amplitude diminishes between 30% and 90% concurrently with an arterial oxygen saturation decrease exceeding 3%, a hypopnea event is documented. After recording, trained sleep technicians visually score data for sleep stages, apnea and hypopnea occurrences, arousals, movements, and other relevant events. They produce a report summarizing apnea and hypopnea counts relative to total sleep time, yielding the apnea–hypopnea index (AHI) that serves as a measure of sleep apnea severity. An AHI below 5/hour is normal; values between 5 and 15 signal low severity; 15 to 30 indicate moderate severity; and above 30 correspond to severe cases. The report guides expert interpretation, though the process is both costly and time-consuming. Home sleep apnea testing, in contrast, captures airflow, respiratory effort, oxygen saturation, heart rate, body position, and estimates of sleep duration. Devices employing these parameters have been validated against gold-standard polysomnography and can distinguish obstructive, mixed, and central apnea events as well as hypopneas, generally providing sufficient accuracy for clinical use. However, limitations remain for patients presenting comorbid cardiovascular or neurological conditions, or complex respiratory issues necessitating CO_2 measurement.

8. Treatment Options for Sleep Apnea

Treatment options for sleep apnoea depend on the type and severity of the condition. For mild obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA), lifestyle interventions such as weight loss, smoking cessation, reduced alcohol intake, positional therapy and consideration of nasal obstruction may improve symptoms. Positional therapy, which promotes side-sleeping or elevates the upper body, can reduce apnoea severity, particularly in younger, less obese patients (Athauda

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Arachchige & Steier, 2022). Mandibular advancement devices may also be useful in mild cases where continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) is not acceptable.

CPAP therapy is the recommended treatment for moderate to severe OSA. This requires nightly use of a nasal or oro-nasal mask connected to a machine that delivers pressurised air to prevent airway collapse. The treatment was introduced in the 1980s and remains highly efficacious, although adherence beyond three months hovers around 75%. In some cases, referral to bariatric services may also be indicated where weight loss is insufficient.

Sleep study results enabling diagnosis of obstructive, central or mixed apnoea furnishes a basis for commencing treatment. OSA may cause daytime fatigue and increased accident risk, and is associated with hypertension, stroke and cardiovascular disease; central apnoea can indicate serious neurological or cardiac conditions (Penzel et al., 2020). The respiratory technician monitors the patient's condition throughout the night to confirm how well treatment alleviates apnoea and to identify other contributory factors such as anxiety and period limb movement disorder.

8.1. Positive Airway Pressure Therapy

Positive-airway-pressure therapy is the primary treatment for obstructive sleep apnea (OSA), which entails an apneic or hypopneic event lasting 10 seconds or longer occurring at least five times/hour during sleep. The sensation of choking, a common symptom of OSA, is attributed to the resumption of breathing effort after a prolonged apneic interval. Treatment options include continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP), biologic approaches, and surgical interventions; among these, CPAP is the most widely applied and effective. The therapy aims to maintain upper airway patency, thereby preventing the irregular breathing patterns characteristic of OSA. Initiation and follow-up assessments often depend on data derived from device-recorded monitoring of adherence and residual events; however, when decisions require the highest level of certainty, polysomnographic evaluation remains the definitive standard (Richter et al., 2022).

8.2. Oral Appliances

Oral Appliances Oral appliances have proven effective in treating patients with obstructive sleep apnea and show promise for those with snoring or upper-airway resistance syndrome (Hoffstein, 2007). Removable and constructed of hard acrylic, these devices must fit comfortably to ensure patient adherence. The mandibular advancement device, designed to protrude and stabilize the mandible, is the most widely studied variant. Other examples include soft palatal lifters and tongue-retaining devices.

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8.3. Surgical Interventions

Historically, surgical procedures for sleep apnea were not considered suitable first-line treatments due to limited efficacy and a paucity of large-scale clinical outcome studies. Nevertheless, surgical intervention remains an alternative for patients intolerant of continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) therapy owing to discomfort or related issues. Among the bifurcation of upper airway sleep apnea into obstructive and central categories, surgical approaches primarily address obstructive forms. Contemporary surgical strategies encompass seven principal techniques: nasal surgery to mitigate resistance; palate enhancement or augmentation (including uvulopalatopharyngoplasty and radiofrequency ablation); tongue base reduction via radiofrequency ablation or midline glossectomy; maxillomandibular advancement with genioglossus advancement and genial tubercle resuspension; hyoid suspension; epiglottoplasty; and tracheostomy. Craniofacial surgeries such as maxillomandibular advancement yield substantial airway expansion and present as robust therapeutic options, albeit typically reserved for contexts of severe sleep apnea or the failure of alternative treatments. Surgical success criteria often entail post-procedural apnea–hypopnea index (AHI) scores of zero, maintenance of oxygen saturation (SaO2) at or above 90%, normalization of sleep architecture, or equivalency to nasal CPAP or bilevel positive airway pressure (BiPAP) observed during second-night titration trials. Residual retrolingual obstruction, frequently incomplete following initial interventions, directs consideration toward secondary options including bimaxillary advancement, tracheotomy, or nasal CPAP. Alternative modalities such as laser midline glossectomy, glossoplasty, or radiofrequency tongue reduction may be employed selectively, though these are infrequently utilized. Owing to multifactorial etiology, no universally applicable surgical algorithm currently exists. Instead, a systematic, phased diagnostic protocol guides treatment selection, reflecting ongoing efforts to delineate consistent, predictive surgical pathways (B. Powell, 2009).

9. Challenges in Diagnosing Sleep Apnea

Diagnosis of sleep apnoea was once performed exclusively in sleep laboratories using polysomnography. Clinical guidelines in most countries now recommend home sleep apnoea testing with simplified systems utilizing six signals only. Such tests achieve high accuracy if signal quality, recording conditions, and patient selection criteria are appropriately considered. Diagnostic tools like smartwatches and wearables purport to detect sleep apnoea by monitoring sleep quality; their efficacy spans a wide spectrum, from rigorously validated algorithms to devices yielding arbitrary reports. Given the disorder's high prevalence, even an arbitrary diagnosis may occasionally reflect a genuine condition. Currently, no established metrics exist to evaluate these alternative algorithms and devices (Penzel et al., 2020). Obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA), characterized by airflow reduction or cessation resulting from airway obstruction and consequent hypoxaemia, sleep arousals, and fragmentation,

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affects approximately 5% of adult men and 2% of women in Western populations (Yelam et al., 2018). It is associated with comorbidities including cardiovascular and neurobehavioural morbidities. Overnight polysomnography (PSG) remains the diagnostic gold standard, providing comprehensive data on apnoeas, hypopnoeas, and respiratory effort-related arousals (RERAs). Severity indices such as the Apnoea Hypopnoea Index (AHI) and Respiratory Disturbance Index (RDI) quantify disease burden, with a diagnosis established if the RDI exceeds five events per hour. Home sleep apnoea testing (HSAT) is increasingly employed for high-risk patients but, lacking EEG measurements, cannot detect RERAs. In a cohort where RERAs were identified during HSAT and the Respiratory Event Index (REI) was subthreshold (<5 events/hour), 67% of those with negative HSAT results were subsequently diagnosed with sleep apnoea upon follow-up PSG. These findings underscore HSAT's propensity to underestimate disease severity and caution that a negative HSAT does not definitively exclude the disorder; airflow pattern analysis during HSAT may nonetheless aid in identifying underlying sleep-related breathing disturbances.

9.1. Patient Compliance Issues

Sleep apnea is a chronic sleep disorder marked by repeated airway obstruction resulting in breathing pauses. It is a leading cause of excessive daytime drowsiness and affects over 18 million adults in the United States alone. It is thought that underdiagnosis is responsible for the absence of a prescription for treatment in such a large proportion of the U.S. population. The recommended study to make a diagnosis of sleep apnea is polysomnography or an overnight sleep study, which entails the complete and simultaneous recording of various physiological variables during sleep. Polysomnography is considered the gold standard for diagnosing sleep apnea due to the detailed information it provides, including measurements of nose and mouth airflow, chest and abdominal movements, body position, heart rate, oxygen saturation, and electroencephalogram (EEG) activity. These measurements facilitate the identification of ongoing respiratory events, their severity (quantified by the apnea-hypopnea index or AHI), and the determination of their obstructive or central origin, as well as the assessment of daytime sleepiness and overall cardiovascular risk (Florencia Angellotti et al., 2023).

Polysomnography is conducted with the assistance of a respiratory technician, an allied health professional with advanced education and training (typically an associate's degree or equivalent) who specializes in assisting physicians with the diagnosis and treatment of cardiopulmonary disorders. Under medical supervision, the respiratory technician attaches sensors to the patient and monitors their physiological functions throughout the night, ensuring the acquisition of high-quality data. They also identify and address any technical problems to prevent data loss, thereby playing a pivotal role in the effective diagnosis and management of sleep apnea.

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9.2. Limitations of Home Sleep Tests

Home sleep tests may be prescribed when clinical suspicion of obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) is high and overnight in-laboratory polysomnography (PSG) is unavailable (Florencia Angellotti et al., 2023). Such devices typically record three or four parameters, including heart rate, respiratory effort, oxygen saturation, airflow, and respiratory sounds. Management requires technical supervision during setup and continuous monitoring throughout the testing period. Home Sleep Apnea Testing (HSAT) with Level III and IV devices is limited by the absence of electroencephalography (EEG) channels. This limitation hinders detection of Respiratory Effort Related Arousals (RERAs), leading to systematic underestimation of sleep apnea severity (Yelam et al., 2018). Patients tend to sleep in the supine position during unattended non-REM sleep at home, a posture known to worsen upper airway collapsibility relative to the lateral posture commonly adopted during in-laboratory PSG (Chartuni Pereira Teixeira & Burihan Cahali, 2024).

Recent analyses underline the superior reliability of in-laboratory PSG conducted in the supine position for characterizing OSA severity and stratifying affected patients. Sensor recalibration under technical supervision and the application of manual scoring are pivotal for accurate assessment. Despite their diagnostic value, healthcare professionals should consider the limitations of PG and HSAT, including the inability to adequately monitor sleep position and the greater destabilization of sleep induced by multi-sensor devices typically employed in PSG. Consequently, tests may not capture OSA severity representative of the patient's natural sleep environment. This deficit underscores the critical role of experienced respiratory sleep technicians in PSG testing. Laboratory technicians are responsible for organising and conducting tests, setting up equipment, selecting and placing appropriate sensors, monitoring the sleep study through specialized software, identifying technical issues, logging patient events, and verifying the quality of recorded signals before study completion.

10. Future Directions in Sleep Medicine

The field of sleep medicine continues to evolve, propelled by technological advances and ongoing clinical research. Personalised medicine tailored to patients' specific pathologies or genetic profiles is becoming increasingly relevant, offering new avenues for effective treatment and management. Consumer sleep technologies have proliferated rapidly; however, much of the data they generate remains of unproven added value. Clinical acceptance will depend on rigorous and comprehensive validation processes that establish their reliability and utility across diverse patient groups (Penzel et al., 2020). Telemedicine is emerging as a highly promising frontier within sleep medicine. The dual challenges of an increasing clinical need and limited clinical resources are directing attention toward telehealth and mobile-health technologies as innovative responses that support the management of long-term conditions, including sleep disorders. Sleep telemedicine has conducted thorough studies demonstrating

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its cost-effectiveness and its positive impact on management strategies, particularly for sleep apnea. Various telemedicine applications specifically designed for the treatment of sleep-disordered breathing are being tested to enhance adherence, monitor patients' progress, and facilitate educational support through structured intervention programs (M. Montserrat Canal et al., 2020). Studies confirm that simple interventions such as telephone coaching and patient education can significantly boost compliance with continuous positive airway pressure therapy and other treatments.

Socio-economic factors will also probably generate additional pressures to improve both efficiency and effectiveness. Life-style interventions and treatments for disorders such as insomnia are less resource-intensive than other sub-disciplines but may, nevertheless, require more costly monitoring to ensure clinical efficacy. Traditional sleep studies and attending polysomnographic recording equipment, currently managed primarily by respiratory therapists, appear well poised to adapt to these emerging clinical needs.

10.1. Advancements in Technology

The majority of sleep studies involve the overnight recording of vital physiologic signals to evaluate a patient's sleep. The procedure, commonly known as polysomnography, precisely monitors the stage and quality of sleep to identify interruptions in breathing and other abnormalities that may cause excessive daytime somnolence (Penzel et al., 2020). Polysomnography equipment generally consists of a computerized test system connected to a series of sensors, detectors, and monitoring leads that simultaneously measure multiple parameters. Respiratory therapists, as trained and skilled healthcare professionals, are qualified to administer these diagnostic procedures.

A technician begins the study by explaining the procedure, conducting a brief medical interview, and obtaining the patient's signed consent. Various sensors are strategically attached to one or more areas of the body. Channels that monitor neurophysiologic functions typically include an electroencephalograph (EEG), electromyograph (EMG), and electrooculograph (EOG). The EEG measures brain-wave activity, the EMG gauges muscle tone, and the EOG tracks eye movements. Respiratory channels include an oronasal thermistor, thoracic and abdominal strain gauges, oxygen saturation measured by oximetry, and the electrocardiograph (ECG). The thermistor records oral and nasal airflow, the strain gauges detect the patient's respiratory effort, oximetry measures blood oxygen saturation, and the electrocardiograph monitors heart rate and rhythm (Bianchi et al., 2014). Once the patient is properly set up, the technician initiates the computer and instructs the patient to relax and to prepare to sleep.

Once the patient falls asleep, the computer begins recording simultaneous measurements from each channel. As the night progresses, the system plots the different signals on a

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continuously moving chart. Abnormalities and irregularities are subsequently identified and annotated on the recording. When the event has met its predetermined time, the computer automatically stops to signal that the study is complete. The technician then removes the monitoring equipment and explains when the patient can expect the results.

10.2. Research Trends in Sleep Disorders

Research on sleep disorders is becoming increasingly diverse. The observation that symptoms representative of conditions such as obstructive sleep apnea, narcolepsy, and excessive daytime sleepiness represent only a subset of their clinical manifestations has encouraged the pursuit of methods to capture factors contributing to these or related symptoms. Progress is being made toward detecting, predicting, and possibly preventing the appearance of sleep disorders that are not clearly characterized by one of the currently defined syndromes (Smily JeyaJothi et al., 2022).

Many questions remain with regard to sleep disorders. For example, it is unclear how these syndromes in particular and sleep disorders in general will be affected by increasing use of pharmacological modulators of sleep/wake state. The developing research literature is expected to be shaped by the emerging understanding that sleep disorders and associated daytime impairments have a significant impact on the economy and national health care goals (Bianchi et al., 2014). Many areas such as memory consolidation, the immune system, metabolic function, and cardiovascular function are typically not attributed to sleep disorder research but have come to the forefront because of research identifying the impact of sleep disorders. Clearly the range of questions continues to evolve and the novel procedures to address these questions will fill a variety of scientific niches (Mendonça et al., 2020).

11. Case Studies

Several case studies further demonstrate the importance of polysomnography as a diagnostic tool. In one study of 111 patients who had undergone Home Sleep Apnea Testing (HSAT), 43 met referral criteria for a polysomnogram, and 67% of that group were subsequently diagnosed with obstructive sleep apnea (Yelam et al., 2018).

A second study compared clinical histories to polysomnography results for patients with suspected OSAS. Though clinical complaints often suggested the presence of the condition, polysomnography remains the only sleep study that can reliably and unequivocally confirm it (Maria Allenstein Gondim et al., 2015).

11.1. Case Study 1: Mild Obstructive Sleep Apnea

This chapter presents a case of mild obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) underscoring the respiratory technician’s role in the diagnostic process. A 45-year-old man with arterial

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hypertension reports excessive daytime sleepiness, episodes of observed apnea, and loud snoring that disturbs household sleep.

OSA is defined by repetitive upper airway collapse during sleep. The resulting oxygen desaturation and sleep disruption cause symptoms including daytime sleepiness, snoring, restless sleep, poor concentration, and fatigue (Maria Allenstein Gondim et al., 2015). Diagnosis requires an elevated apnea–hypopnea index, determined by polysomnography.

The patient's clinical history combined with elevated body mass index and arterial hypertension indicate the need for a diagnostic sleep study. Laboratory overnight polysomnography records electroencephalography, electromyography, electro-oculography, electrocardiography, airflow, respiratory effort, oxygen saturation, body position, and limb movements (Yelam et al., 2018). Analysis reveals an apnea–hypopnea index of 7.3 accompanied by 3% oxygen desaturation, indicative of mild obstructive sleep apnea.

Treatment following diagnosis typically involves continuous positive airway pressure or oral appliance therapy (Ogawa et al., 2006). The case highlights the respiratory technician's pivotal role in obtaining the recordings underpinning the sleep study.

11.2. Case Study 2: Complex Sleep Apnea

A 40-year-old female with no significant past medical history, diagnosed with moderate obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) in late 2007, underwent three polysomnograms (PSGs) during autumn 2008 due to persistent daytime sleepiness. Initial nocturnal continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) titration, performed less than one year after diagnosis, revealed a diagnosis of complex sleep apnea (figure 11.2.5). Diagnosed as OSA in 2007, the patient immediately commenced auto CPAP therapy at home, but her daytime symptoms failed to improve despite apparent treatment compliance. The first and third PSGs were conducted off CPAP, while the second represented a CPAP titration. Findings indicated that the patient had initially developed complex sleep apnea, with successfully titrated pressure alleviating the disorder and restoring normal sleep architecture. Complex sleep apnea affects approximately 5% of patients presenting with obstructive sleep apnea (Bianchi et al., 2014). Following initial CPAP therapy, most patients experience near-complete resolution of obstructive apneas (Ogawa et al., 2006). However, a subset of individuals develop new respiratory events characterised primarily by central apneas and obstructive hypopneas, despite diminished obstructive apnea presence, without another underlying disorder to explain the findings. Polysomnography permits identification of respiratory events occurring during wakefulness or rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, when central apneas are typically unusual (Yelam et al., 2018). Establishing the presence of complex sleep apnea is particularly important, as these patients usually necessitate different treatment modalities. Analogous to periodic limb movements of sleep, complex sleep apnea is considered a characteristic medical disorder

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rather than merely a polysomnographic phenomenon. The respiratory technician's role in identification of complex sleep apnea remains pivotal; only through detailed knowledge of sleep physiology can they determine that, for example, a wake-adjusted apnea index of 20 events per hour and a central apnea index of eight events per hour in REM represent clinically relevant abnormalities, rather than mere 'technical artifact'. Subsequent chapters discuss the principal therapeutic options and detailed sleep-physiology mechanisms mediating the development of this disorder.

12. Patient Education and Support

Respiratory technologists undertake an important role in patient education and support. The first point of contact for the patient in the sleep laboratory, they have a vital role in explaining the nature of the tests and what they intend to achieve, and they are respected by patients for their expertise and ability to overcome any anxieties and concerns they might have, both before and during the study (Shrivastava et al., 2014). It is often daily contact with the technologist that encourages patients to continue with their therapy regime. They also act as an important bridge between doctor and patient, explaining reports; and many centres have technologist-led clinics to provide guidance and support on devices and mask fitting, follow-up and troubleshooting.

The technologist's extensive understanding of the technical and clinical aspects of obstructive sleep apnoea ensures their expertise is valued throughout the diagnostic process and in particular when setting up the patient for their sleep study.

Interpretation of Poly Somno Graphy (PSG) remains the domain of the specialist clinician; however, the technologist can provide an initial impression of the sleep data and the observance of events from the subsequent scoring demonstrates the significance of such preliminary assessment to the reporting process.

12.1. Educating Patients About Sleep Apnea

Being diagnosed with a sleep disorder can be overwhelming for many patients. Respiratory therapists play a critical role in this process, not only by conducting the sleep study but also by helping patients understand their condition. Patients with sleep apnea have been given the opportunity to participate in a support group that meets regularly at the center. These groups foster connections among patients with similar issues and offer encouragement throughout treatment. (Shrivastava et al., 2014)

12.2. Support Groups and Resources

Patients who suspect they have sleep apnoea have many potential channels of support. Community and national support groups offer live and online meetings, accredited education programmes, tumultuous discussion boards, and podcasts. Respiratory technicians play a

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fundamental role in support networks. At the Sleep Assessment and Advisory Service (SAAS) in the UK, technicians arrange support group advertising, discuss apnoea symptoms during telephone triage, and run an equipment education programme for patients prescribed continuous positive airway pressure. The Sleep Apnoea Trust Association participates in single-day national events that often assume a technician role. Meetings allow the trained and untrained alike to exchange day-to-day information. A structured approach paired with a supportive environment encourages patients to share their often debilitating experiences (Shrivastava et al., 2014) (Yelam et al., 2018) (Penzel et al., 2020).

13. Conclusion

Sleep apnea, a common yet frequently undiagnosed condition, manifests through symptoms such as loud snoring, choking, excessive daytime sleepiness, and morning headaches (Shrivastava et al., 2014). Polysomnography—the comprehensive assessment of electrophysiological changes during sleep—remains the definitive diagnostic modality (Penzel et al., 2020). Respiratory technicians play an indispensable role in conducting sleep studies, during which they prepare patients, apply electrode arrays, and oversee overnight data acquisition to identify apneas, hypopneas, and oxygen desaturation events. Given the high prevalence of untreated obstructive sleep apnea among commercial vehicle operators, respiratory technicians contribute significantly to public safety by ensuring timely and accurate diagnosis. Consequently, polysomnography conducted by skilled respiratory technicians constitutes an essential element in the diagnostic pathway for sleep apnea.

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