Respiratory Dysfunctions Related to Insecticide Exposure Among Farmers in Sindh, Pakistan
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Abstract The insecticide effect on lung physiology is well reported. Data on respiratory dysfunction after insecticide exposure to farmers are scanty in Pakistan. Present study was designed to determine the frequency and reported respiratory symptoms among two groups of farmers. One group comprised of ‘insecticide spray-workers’ (n=324) and other group was of non users of agrochemical substances, i.e. the comparison group (n=209). Male farmers between the ages of 25 to 45 years, and who were non smokers were enrolled in the study from various areas of Sindh province (Pakistan) during agriculture crop season 2006-07. The farmers were introduced a questionnaire gleaning information on farming characteristics and respiratory symptoms. Spirometry was carried out to assess lung functions. Computer software Minitab 8.0 version was used to analyze data. A greater proportion of insecticide spray workers reported respiratory symptoms; dyspnea, bronchitis, asthma and rhinitis as compared to farmers who did not handle insecticides. Comparative values of FEV1 and FEV1/FVC ratio were also significantly low in insecticide spray workers. The results suggest that obstructive and restrictive lung functions are more prevalent in the farmers who were exposed to insecticides than non user comparison group. These differences were statistically significant.

Keywords: Insecticides, Spirometry, Farmers

Introduction
Insecticides use in agriculture sector has been considered a risk for development of respiratory problems [1-2]. Respiratory symptoms such as wheezing, difficulty in breathing and cough are, not specific to exposure to pesticides, but can also occur to conditions such as exposure to pollens and to other occupational exposures [3-4]. A prolonged insecticide exposure in agriculture settings might result in chronic airflow limitation through airway obstruction or loss of elastic recoil in damaged parenchyma. In this framework the development of restrictive and/or obstructive respiratory findings in crop farmers may be associated with exposure to a variety of insecticides as well [5-6]. Information on respiratory illness related to insecticide exposure is scant from Pakistan. Only one survey from province of Sindh, Pakistan reported a significant increase in respiratory disorders among the farmers who were exposed to pesticides [7]. Studies from developed countries suggest that the morbidity and mortality rates due to certain respiratory disorders are higher in farmers as compared to the general population and are most likely due to occupational contact to insecticides [8-10]. Airway obstruction in agriculture farmers is reported with use of insecticide products belonging to classified chemical groups like organochlorines, organophosphates, carbamates and pyrethroids [11-12]. Due to their toxic effects it has been a recommendation, to further evaluate the lung function measurements in the farmers who are exposed to these chemicals. Acute reduction in forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV1) is also reported by some researchers.
[13-15]. Gamsky et al 1992, have shown that California grape workers had lower forced vital capacity (FVC) compared to tomato and citrus workers [16]. To the best of knowledge no such reports are cited in literature on lung function tests in farmers at provincial and/or national level in Pakistan. Therefore, the objectives of this study were to find out the frequency and level of respiratory morbidity on lung function among the farmers’ population from Province of Sindh Pakistan.

Materials and Methods

Study Population: A comparison of two population proportions were carried out to compare the frequency of respiratory symptoms and lung function tests among farmers who were exposed to insecticides (n= 324) and who never handled any insecticides (n= 209). Our sample size was based on hypothesis testing for two population proportions (two sided test). Study participants were exclusively non-smokers agriculture male farmers, living in different areas of Sindh province of Pakistan. A study questionnaire was specifically designed for the study purpose to glean information on demographics and lifestyle, work history, occupational exposures, and the presence of respiratory symptoms in farmers. The study was conducted during agriculture crops for the year 2006-07. Convenient sampling method was used to identify the study subjects. Farmers who fulfilled the laid down eligibility criteria i.e. exposed or non-exposed status to insecticides and being non-smokers. Both groups were matched on age.

Spirometry: Lung function examination was carried out in triplicate by a trained technician, using a daily-calibrated hand-held spirometer (SP2). Each participant completed a dynamic spirometry and the values were expressed in liters for FEV$_1$ and FVC while FEV$_1$/FVC ratio calculated in percentage.

Data analysis: Data were analyzed using Minitab software version 8.0. Initially data collected by questionnaire were calculated in percentile and T-test was applied for data on spirometry.

Results

We were able to interview 340 farmers in the exposed group and 220 farmers in the comparison group. Farmers interviewed were between the ages of 25-45 years. Three of the subjects from the comparison group and six from the exposed group were removed from the final analysis due to inconsistencies in the data. However, eight subjects in the comparison group and ten in the exposure group were kept in the analysis as information was missing on few variables. Selection of participating comparison group (controls) and spray workers at crops (subjects) is given in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Farmers in approach</th>
<th>Control (220)</th>
<th>Subject (340)</th>
<th>Farmers at Crop</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n) (%)</td>
<td>(n) (%)</td>
<td>Cotton orchards (140)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real Participants</td>
<td>209 (95%)</td>
<td>324 (95.29%)</td>
<td>133 (95%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial Participants</td>
<td>08 (3.63%)</td>
<td>10 (2.94%)</td>
<td>4 (2.85%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ineligible</td>
<td>03 (1.36%)</td>
<td>6 (1.76%)</td>
<td>3 (2.14%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Farmers in the exposed group reported handling, mixing, loading and spraying insecticides by “Back pack sprays” without putting on ‘European style safety kit’ for their protection. Insecticide products used as routine for crop protection were from four chemical groups namely organochlorines, organophosphates, carbamates and pyrethroids. Sprays were done during morning hours for three to six times in each spray-season for cotton, tomato and mango-orchards.

Table 2
Insecticides sprayed per crop season by subject farmers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Insecticide</th>
<th>Chemical group</th>
<th>WHO Classification by Hazard</th>
<th>Sprays per crop season</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parathion</td>
<td>Organophosphates</td>
<td>1 A</td>
<td>05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monocrotophos 36% SL</td>
<td>Organophosphates</td>
<td>1 B</td>
<td>04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phorate 10% G</td>
<td>Organophosphates</td>
<td>1B</td>
<td>03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triazophos 40% EC</td>
<td>Organophosphates</td>
<td>1B</td>
<td>04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chlorpyriphos 20% EC</td>
<td>Organophosphates</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profenophos 50% EC</td>
<td>Organophosphates</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimethoate 30% EC</td>
<td>Organophosphates</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endosulfan 35 EC</td>
<td>Organochlorines</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carbofuran</td>
<td>Carbamates</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carbaryl</td>
<td>Carbamates</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lambda cyhalothrin 5%</td>
<td>Pyrethroids</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cypermethrin 25% EC</td>
<td>Pyrethroids</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fenvalerate 20% EC</td>
<td>Pyrethroids</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 describes the insecticides and their chemical group categorized according to WHO classification by hazard it causes, and number of sprays during each crop season.

Table 3
Number and percentage of the farmers having respiratory symptoms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Farmers</th>
<th>SYMPTOMS</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asthma</td>
<td>Bronchitis</td>
<td>Dyspnoea</td>
<td>Rhinitis</td>
<td>Farmers without symptoms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control (n=209)</td>
<td>3 (1.43%)</td>
<td>9 (4.30%)</td>
<td>11 (5.26%)</td>
<td>14 (7.70%)</td>
<td>172 (82.30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject (n=324)</td>
<td>8 (2.47%)</td>
<td>86 (26.54%)</td>
<td>128 (39.50%)</td>
<td>69 (21.30%)</td>
<td>33 (10.18%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 give a comparison of respiratory symptoms experienced by farmers exposed to insecticides and those who never handled insecticides in life time. Generally a large proportion of farmers in the exposed group reported one or the other of the respiratory symptoms. Dyspnoea and bronchitis were the most common symptoms reported by the farmers who were exposed to the insecticides handling. The majority of farmers who never handled insecticides were symptoms free unless they had other reasons to suffer.
Table 4 describes the percentile of only subject farmers exposed to insecticide groups, most of them were affected (symptomatic) and very few were safe (asymptomatic). Consequently organophosphates and organochlorines both were recorded for inducing dyspnoea, carbamates for brochitis, pyrethroids for rhinitis and organochlorines for asthma in the symptomatic subject farmers.

It is interesting to note that respiratory symptoms were also related to the type of crop and insecticide used. It was noted that farmers exposed to organophosphates and carbamates, following sprays on cotton crop were the worst hit for respiratory disorders. Symptoms were significantly low in farmers to spray on tomato and mango crops as revealed in Figure 1.

The differences in the respiratory symptoms between the two groups were statistically significant after assessing lung air flow. The levels of FEV$_1$, FVC and FEV$_1$/FVC ratio, were assessed by spirometry on both exposed (subjects) and comparison groups (controls). Here the low levels of FEV$_1$, FVC and FEV$_1$/FVC ratio, in the subjects as compared to the control group, were seen. These differences observed were statistically significant (Table 5).

Table 5  
T-test for lung function tests indicating level of significance amongst the farmers (worked out at 95% confidence limit)
Discussion

The higher proportion of respiratory symptoms and low levels of lung function tests in farmers exposed to insecticide spray are strongly suggestive of the dire health consequences in farmers who are engaged in such activities. The insecticides used by the farmers for crop protection in Sindh are already under WHO classification, as hazardous if not used with appropriate precautions. By virtue of their hazardous class and mode of action as ‘neurotoxic’, these may be associated with disruption in respiratory functions [17]. This linkage was further supported as farmers reported insecticide spray without taking appropriate self-protective measures that allow free entry of insecticides in different organ systems of the body. The protective gears and safety equipments have not been designed to be used by the workers for humid tropics like Pakistan resulting in their non-efficiency or non-use [18]. We selected those farmers as our study subjects who were non-smokers to control for symptoms resulting due to prolonged smoking. Respiratory symptoms recorded in study population unveiled higher percentile of dyspnoea (39.50%), bronchitis (26.54%), rhinitis (21.30%) and asthma (2.47%) in the farmers working as spray-men. Whereas complaints of dyspnoea (5.26%), bronchitis (4.30%), rhinitis (7.70%) and asthma (1.43%), were lesser in the comparison group. Our results are consistent with previous studies conducted using international standardized questionnaires, where prevalence of respiratory symptom rate varies between 7–26% among various farming populations [19-20]. Most of the products reported by our study participants are known neurotoxins, and cholinesterase inhibitors. Acetylcholine is a powerful respiratory stimulant [21], its synthesis, identification and destruction is differentiated in the medullary region of brain that contains respiratory neurons [22-23]. Organophosphates put forth their effects by inhibition of acetylcholinesterase and consequent increase in acetylcholine. Some authors reported respiratory failure, a well-known characteristic of acute organophosphate poisoning with an early central apnea followed by later pulmonary effects [24-26]. Therefore the symptoms reported in this study and insecticide exposure consistently verify the probable role of cholinesterase inhibitors for respiratory dysfunctions in the farmer community. Table 4 and Figure 1 show the effects on the group exposed to insecticides, placing organochlorine as most injurious, followed by cholinesterase inhibitors (organophosphates and carbamates) then pyrethroids responsible for respiratory dysfunctions in the subject farmers. The uptake of such toxic insecticides in the lungs and prolonged retention of its inhaled particles causes inflammation of lung parenchyma and damage to the tissues [27-29]. Depending on the chemical nature and usage, the insecticides were witnessed for their toxic effects, as present results reveal the difference in percentage of symptomatic and asymptomatic subject farmers who sprayed cholinesterase inhibitors; the organophosphates and carbamates (Table 4). Figure 1 shows highest percentage (75.75%) of subject farmers with respiratory symptoms after exposure to organochlorines followed by cholinesterase inhibitors at cotton crop. Increased number of sprays given to the cotton crop may be the reason for its intense effect. Many agro-chemical products were reported for highly toxic effects on pneumocytes, inducing inflammation and known responsible for lung injury a major reason towards respiratory dysfunctions. Prevalence and extent of insecticide associated lung function examined by spirometry was not reported in the farmers of Sindh, though some reference values for lung function were reported in
the Pakistani population [30]. Using this technique, Dosman et al (1987) reported significantly lower FVC, FEV₁, FEV₁/FVC values in farmers compared to control subjects, with pronounced differences in farmers belong to middle-ages [31]. Iversen and Pedersen (1990) on the other hand have found no significant impairment of lung function in farming populations compared with controls, despite increasing symptoms [32]. Interpretations of present findings indicate significant differences (p<0.001) in mean values for FEV₁, FVC and FEV₁/FVC ratio (Table 5), which reveal both obstructive, and restrictive lung functions in the farmers exposed to insecticides. However, increasing rate of respiratory dysfunction among the farmers exposed to insecticides in this work was seen apparent in the exposed group as compared to comparison group at similar inhabitancy.

Conclusions

Present results thus provide evidence that prevalent insecticide spray practices affects on respiratory functions in the farmers in a significantly deleterious manners, especially those working in cotton crops. This work suggests undertaking additional studies on women and children of farmer communities to assess gender and age-dependent variations.

References


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