Remifentanil versus dexmedetomidine for posterior spinal fusion surgery

Poupak Rahimzadeh¹, Seyed Hamid Reza Faiz*², Mahzad Alimian³
Ali Mohammadian Erdi⁴

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Abstract
Background: Controlling the hemodynamic situation of patients who have spinal operation is of prime importance, and maintaining the heart rate and blood pressure in normal or low-normal levels in these patients can reduce their bleeding loss. One of the commonly used drugs for this purpose is remifentanil. Another sedative-hypnotic-analgesic drug, with acceptable effects is dexmedetomidine. The aim of this study was to compare the effect of dexmedetomidine with remifentanil in spinal operation.

Methods: In a double blind randomized clinical trial, using random sampling method, 60 patients with the age range of 15-65 years who were candidates for posterior spinal fusion operation were included. Induction of anesthesia was performed, and both groups received isoflurane 1% during the surgery. Remifentanil was injected via infusion pump in one group. The patients in the trial group received dexmedetomidine. As trial outcomes, heart rate and blood pressure were measured before, after induction and during the operation. Pain score, sedation score and the need to analgesic therapy were recorded in the recovery room and the ward. Independent sample t-test and chi-square were used for statistical analysis.

Results: Dexmedetomidine had a significant lowering impact on intraoperative blood pressure and heart rate compared to remifentanil (p<0.001). The mean of sedation scores after extubation in patients who received dexmedetomidine was significantly higher than the sedation scores in patients who received remifentanil (p<0.001). The mean of post-extubation and recovery pain score in patients taking remifentanil was significantly higher than patients taking dexmedetomidine (p<0.05).

Conclusion: Dexmedetomidine in patients with spinal operation is associated with lower postoperative pain score and intraoperative bleeding. Hemodynamic effects are significantly better in patients received dexmedetomidine.

Keywords: Dexmedetomidine, Hemodynamic, Spinal fusion, Remifentanil.


Introduction
Hemodynamic monitoring and maintaining the heartbeat and blood pressure of patients undergoing spinal surgery is of prime importance. It leads to better control of bleeding in the surgical field, particularly in congested, small and limited areas such as spine. Considering the nature of the spinal fusion surgery as a major surgery with a possibility of bleeding and the fact that this surgery is performed on the elderly or traumatic patients in many circumstances, the goal is to choose a drug with appropriate hemodynamic effects while providing good anesthetic depth and short recovery state. Using a potent and short acting opioid

¹. Associate Professor of Anesthesiology, Faculty of Medicine, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. Poupak_rah@hotmail.com
². (Corresponding author) Associate Professor of Anesthesiology, Faculty of Medicine, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. hrfaiz@hotmail.com
³. Assistant Professor of Anesthesiology, Faculty of Medicine, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. mahzadalmian@gmail.com
⁴. Associate Professor of Anesthesiology, Faculty of Medicine, Ardebil University of Medical Sciences, Ardebil, Iran. amohammadian@arums.ac.ir
such as remifentanil follows this rule. Remi-
fen-tanil has been used successfully as an
analgesic-sedative drug in the recent years.
We chose remifentanil because it is an ul-
tra-rapid opioid with safe and convenient
tapering effects. On the other hand, this
drug is as potent as fentanyl. Another seda-
tive-hypnotic-analgesic drug with an ac-
ceptable effect is dexmedetomidine (DEX).
DEX has been known as a highly selective
α2 -adrenoceptor agonist and has been
used as a sedative agent in some operative
and clinical situations (1-3). Some investiga-
tors reported that DEX could reduce the
propofol requirement in remifentanil-based
anesthesia for faster postoperative recovery
and more stable intraoperative hemody-
namics (4, 5). However, the exact propofol
sparing impact of DEX during remifentan-
il-based anesthesia has not been well investi-
gated.

Previous studies have found that DEX
had complex vasodilative and vasoconstric-
tive hemodynamic effects on pre and
postsynaptic α2 -receptors. The effect of
DEX in a lower dose was vasodilation and
its vasoconstriction effects have been pre-
sented in higher doses. Reduction of blood
pressure and heart rate decreased after
long-term DEX usage (6, 7).

Controlling hemodynamic state of pa-
patients who have spinal operation is very
important, and maintaining their heart rate
and blood pressure in normal or low-
normal levels can reduce their bleeding loss.
To increase anesthesia depth and minimize
serious side effects, it is necessary to care-
fully choose and use appropriate drugs
during the operation. This study was designed
to compare the effect of DEX as an analge-
sic and sedative drug with remifentanil as
an adjuvant drug in anesthesia regimen in
spinal operation.

**Methods**

**Patients**

In the present randomized clinical trial
with a parallel design, 60 patients in the age
range of 15-65 years who were candidates
for posterior spinal fusion operation were
included. This study was approved in the
Research Ethical Committee of Iran Uni-
versity of Medical Sciences; written in-
formed consent was obtained from all the
participants. The clinical trial was regis-
tered in the Iranian Clinical Trial Registry
System as IRCT2012081410336N3. A pilot
study of pain reported by patients after spi-
nal fusion surgery revealed that the average
VAS score for pain was 3 with a standard
deviation of 1.4. The sample-size calcula-
tion was based on a maximum allowable
difference of 1 in VAS scores. Inclusion of
30 patients in each group provided a power
of 0.80 when alpha was set at 0.05. Sam-
ple size was calculated based on the follow-
ing formula:

\[
2N = \frac{4(\alpha \times Z_\alpha / 2)^2 \sigma^2}{\beta^2}
\]

Considering alpha= 0.05, beta= 20% and
the calculation power 80%; the sample size
was 60 patients. Eligibility criteria for the
patients included in the trial were: patients
with ASA class I or II, candidates for pos-
terior spinal fusion surgery in maximum 3
levels, surgical time between 2-5 hours,
participation agreement, and without cardi-
vascular, pulmonary, neurological, nep-
holgy and coagulopathy abnormality in
their history and physical examination. All
the operations were performed in Rasool-
Akram hospital complex affiliated to Iran
University of Medical Sciences.

Patients were randomized using block
randomization method and were equally
divided into two trial groups with 30 pa-
tients. They were monitored in the opera-
tion room. The monitoring device was
Massimo (SAADAT Company, Iran) and
we also used electrocardiography, pul-
soxymetry, NIBP and capnograph for these
patients. Therefore, the blood pressure was
monitored in a non-invasive way. Induction
of anesthesia was performed for all the pa-
tients using fentanyl 3 microgram/ kilo-
gram, midazolam 0.1 milligram/kilogram
as premedication and was continued with
0.2 milligram/kilogram cis-atracurium and sodium thiopental 5 milligram/kilogram. This study was double blinded and patients and their surgeons were both blind to the intervention and an unknown person of research team prepared encrypted codes separately. Both groups received isoflurane 1% during the surgery as a maintenance regimen. It has been observed that DEX can decrease the heart rate and induce bradycardia in special doses; propofol has this effect as well. So we chose isoflurane which does not have this effect and was a suitable inhalation anesthetic agent for this study.

As an intervention in one group, remifentanil (Ultiva, Abbott, CA) was injected firstly using infusion pump with a dose of 1 microgram/kilogram in 15 minutes and then injected with continuous infusion with a dose of 0.2 microgram/kilogram/min. In the other group, patients received DEX (Precedex, Hospira, USA) firstly via infusion pump with a dose of 1 microgram/kilogram in 15 minutes continued followed by an infusion of 0.5 microgram/kilogram/hour. DEX was prepared as 4 microgram/milliliters in 0.9% sodium chloride infusion. For the postoperative pain control, an infusion pump containing 1000 micrograms of fentanyl was used in the first day followed by a rate of four milliliters per hour.

As trial outcomes, heart rate and mean arterial blood pressure (MAP) was measured before and after induction and every 15 minutes during the surgery. In patients with bradycardia (heart rate<40 bits/minute) and MAP<50 mmhg, five milligrams of ephedrine was injected and recorded; and in non-responded cases, patients were excluded from the trial. In patients with increased or decreased blood pressure, 10% increase or decrease in isoflurane dosage was used. If blood pressure or heart rate were still elevated, fentanyl 50 microgram was used. In hypertensive patients who were non-responder to isoflurane or fentanyl, nitroglycerine infusion was used and they were then excluded from the study. At the end of the surgery, all the drugs were discontinued and patients were extubated and transferred to the recovery room. In order to provide a similar condition, 50 microgram of fentanyl was injected for patients at the end of operation just after anesthetic drug cessation. Awakening time after anesthetic drugs cessation, time of discharge from recovery, surgeon satisfaction score from surgical field (good, moderate, poor) and bleeding loss were recorded. Time of discharge from recovery was estimated according to Al-drete score.

Pain score, sedation score and the need to analgesic therapy were recorded in first 30, 60,120 and 360 minutes after entrance to the recovery room; so patients were evaluated in the ward. In case of analgesic need (VAS>4) in the recovery and ward, 15 mg intravenous ketorolac was injected and recorded in the prepared questionnaire.

Statistical analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS (IBM statistics) 20.0 software. Data remained blinded until all data were collected. Quantitative variables were presented as mean ± standard deviation, and qualitative variables were presented as count and percentages. Independent sample t-test and chi-square were used for statistical analysis to compare numerical and categorical data, respectively between the two groups if they had a normal distribution. Data without normal distribution were analyzed through nonparametric equivalents of the mentioned tests. Repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to review the results at different time points. All results of statistical tests lower than 0.05 were assumed as significant.

Results

In this study, baseline variables such as age, gender, body mass index, having diabetes mellitus and hypertension were significantly different between the two trial groups. Female/male ratio in the remifentanil group was 9/21, and it was 12/18 (p=0.401) in the DEX group.
Four patients in the remifentanil group, and 2 patients in the DEX group had diabetes (p= 0.890), and 5 patients had hypertension (p<0.001). Details of comparison between the two groups were presented in Table 1.

The mean of blood pressure (p = 0.005) and heart rate (p<0.001) had significant changes in patients who received remifentanil and DEX as study intervention compared to the baseline time. In the study patients, DEX had a significant lowering impact on intraoperative blood pressure and heart rate compared to remifentanil (p<0.01).

The mean of sedation scores after extubation in patients who received DEX was significantly higher than sedation scores in patients who received remifentanil (p<0.01).

Awakening time in patients of the remifentanil group was significantly lower than patients of DEX group (3.11±15.75 vs. 4.89±32.93; p<0.001). There was a significant difference between the two groups in term of need to Fentanyl at 105 minutes during the operation (p= 0.010). In other measured times during operation, the need to fentanyl injection had no significant difference between the patients of the two groups. In the first 30 and 60 minutes of entrance to the recovery room, the need for analgesic therapy in the remifentanil group was significantly higher than the DEX group (0.4±2.1 vs. 0.3±1.8; p=0.03). The mean pain scores one and two hours after entering the recovery ward in was significantly higher in the remifentanil group comparing the DEX group (p<0.001). Six hours after extubation, the mean pain score was not significantly different between the two groups (0.4±2.9 vs. 0.8±2.7; p=0.2). Surgeons were more satisfied with the observed outcomes in patients of the DEX group compared to the patients of the remifentanil group (100% vs. 78.6%; p=0.01). Bleeding loss during operation was significantly lower in patients in the DEX group. (p<0.05)

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of demographic variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameters</th>
<th>Remifentanil (n=30)</th>
<th>Dexmedetomidine (n=30)</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (Mean±SD)</td>
<td>54±7.65</td>
<td>55.57±8.95</td>
<td>0.480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI (Mean±SD)</td>
<td>25.88±2.37</td>
<td>26.50±2.86</td>
<td>0.420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awakening time (min)</td>
<td>15.7±3.10</td>
<td>32.9±4.90</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discharge time from recovery (min)</td>
<td>33.3±3.80</td>
<td>48.5±5.40</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Graph1- Time series of Mean Arterial Pressure (MAP) and Pulse rate (PR) among study participants
Discussion

Although in this present study the mean blood pressure (BP) and heart rate (HR) revealed significant difference in both drugs, DEX had a significant lowering impact on intra-operative BP and HR compared to remifentanil. Sedation after extubation was significantly higher in patients who received DEX compared to patients who received remifentanil. In addition, in the DEX group lower need to analgesic was observed in some intra-operative times and more specifically in postoperative period. Some previous studies found relatively similar trial findings and reported that DEX can make 30-50% reduction in the propofol requirement in concomitant use of DEX in adolescent patients and healthy volunteers (1, 2). It seems that the sedative impact of DEX in patients is mediated by locus ceruleus in the brain stem. In this region, DEX decreases sympathetic and increases parasympathetic outflow (8, 9).

Laryngoscope insertion and endotracheal intubation can induce the sympathetic nervous system and cause severe tachycardia, hypertension or arrhythmia (10). Several studies had been performed on the reduction of these cardiovascular responses. DEX is a very effective alpha-2 agonist and has more impact on stabilizing cardiovascular system after intubation and reduces the need to analgesic and sedative drugs preoperatively (11). Some investigators such as Segal et al. reported a decrease in requirement for halothane, and Aho et al.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Remifentanil</th>
<th>Dexmedomidine</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before induction</td>
<td>MAP 100.96 ± 16.57</td>
<td>80.18 ± 8.44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HR 77.96 ± 10.91</td>
<td>80.18 ± 8.44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After intubation</td>
<td>MAP 112.89 ± 22.23</td>
<td>98.32 ± 7.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HR 96.96 ± 9.03</td>
<td>98.32 ± 7.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 minutes after operation</td>
<td>MAP 95.32 ± 15.54</td>
<td>84.29 ± 8.58</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HR 84.25 ± 5.76</td>
<td>84.29 ± 8.57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 minutes after operation</td>
<td>MAP 89.64 ± 14.96</td>
<td>77.29 ± 6.15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HR 79.25 ± 4.39</td>
<td>72.29 ± 6.15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 minutes after operation</td>
<td>MAP 88.04 ± 13.08</td>
<td>72.68 ± 7.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HR 77.14 ± 4.12</td>
<td>68.57 ± 10.08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 minutes after operation</td>
<td>MAP 90.0 ± 22.60</td>
<td>68.57 ± 10.08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HR 75.43 ± 4.07</td>
<td>68.58 ± 7.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75 minutes after operation</td>
<td>MAP 83.50 ± 8.88</td>
<td>66.64 ± 10.08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HR 73.07 ± 13.76</td>
<td>66.64 ± 10.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90 minutes after operation</td>
<td>MAP 82.50 ± 9.08</td>
<td>66 ± 10.11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HR 75.29 ± 5.69</td>
<td>66 ± 10.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>105 minutes after operation</td>
<td>MAP 83.21 ± 10.29</td>
<td>65.64 ± 10.41</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HR 76.14 ± 7.46</td>
<td>65.64 ± 10.40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>120 minutes after operation</td>
<td>MAP 83.57 ± 7.56</td>
<td>65.18 ± 9.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HR 76.0 ± 6.84</td>
<td>65.18 ± 9.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>150 minutes after operation</td>
<td>MAP 83.61 ± 5.67</td>
<td>64.64 ± 9.11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HR 77.64 ± 7.95</td>
<td>64.64 ± 9.11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>180 minutes after operation</td>
<td>MAP 81.89 ± 6.02</td>
<td>65.21 ± 9.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HR 77.43 ± 7.02</td>
<td>65.21 ± 9.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>210 minutes after operation</td>
<td>MAP 82.14 ± 6.45</td>
<td>66.14 ± 10.12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HR 76.61 ± 6.43</td>
<td>66.14 ± 10.12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>240 minutes after operation</td>
<td>MAP 83.52 ± 5.69</td>
<td>67.57 ± 10.03</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HR 77.63 ± 6.03</td>
<td>67.57 ± 10.03</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of blood pressure and heart rate between two trial groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Remifentanil</th>
<th>Dexmedomidine</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study group Sedation score</td>
<td>Remifentanil (Mean±sd)</td>
<td>Dexmedomidine (Mean±sd)</td>
<td>p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After extubation</td>
<td>2.9±0.36</td>
<td>3.11±0.32</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 minutes later</td>
<td>1.0±0.01</td>
<td>2.96±0.19</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 minutes later</td>
<td>1.18±0.39</td>
<td>2.61±0.57</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>120 minutes later</td>
<td>2.0±0.01</td>
<td>1.96±0.19</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>360 minutes later</td>
<td>2.0±0.01</td>
<td>2±0.01</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Mean of sedation scores between patients of both trial groups
reported a decrease in a requirement for isoflurane up to 90% (12, 13). Moreover, in one study, the dosage of thiopental sodium was significantly decreased after using DEX in anesthesia (14). DEX can decline the serum level of catecholamine and norepinephrine against some of the stressful stimuli such as intubation (15).

Some other studies reported that DEX have complex of vasodilation and vasoconstriction impacts, by activating pre-synaptic α2-receptors on sympathetic and post-synaptic α2 -receptors of the central nervous system mediates vasodilation, and by effects on post-synaptic α2 -receptors on vascular smooth muscle cells can mediate vasoconstriction impacts (16-18). Some previous studies reported a biphasic and dose-dependent impact for DEX on the blood pressure and heart rate of patients (17, 18). On the other hand, DEX increases BP in the short-term usage and decreases BP in patients in the long time usage. DEX in low dosage (plasma concentrations, 0.7-1.2 ng/ml) causes reduction in the release of norepinephrine release and an inhibition of sympathetic neurotransmission by activating α2A receptors (6, 8, 19). The high dosage of DEX (i.e., plasma concentrations, >1.9 ng/ml) produces α2B receptor-mediated vasoconstriction (6, 8). Most previous studies confirmed cardiovascular depressive effects of DEX and reported an increase in the incidence of hypotension and bradycardia (7, 14, 19). The propofol-sparing effect of DEX may be beneficial for the reduction of the propofol dosage and may avoid the adverse effects such as myocardial depression, metabolic acidosis, impaired platelet aggregation and extended recovery caused by prolonged and large-dose administration of propofol (20-24).

This study had some limitations that should be considered for the future studies in this filed. Firstly, our study was performed in one hospital and with patients with one type of operation. Conducting multicenter studies with patients of different operation types is recommended. Secondly, some of the disease characters in spinal regions might have effects on their hemodynamic changes. For the future studies, it is recommended to match the study variables and randomly select the participants while excluding patients with previous history of hemodynamic changes.

**Conclusion**

Dexmedetomidine in patients with spinal operation is associated with lower postoperative pain score and intraoperative bleeding; Hemodynamic effects are also significantly better in the DEX group.

**Acknowledgements**

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**References**