CASE REPORT

Journal of Indonesia Vascular Access (*INAVA*) 2025, Volume 5, Number 1: 18-21
E-ISSN : 2798-6780 ; P - ISSN : 2807-7032

Published By : IVAA
the Indonesian Vascular Access Association

Role of awake thoracoscopy in diagnosis before chest tube insertion in lung empyema

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Received: 2025-01-22
Accepted: 2025-03-10
Published: 2025-04-03

ABSTRACT

Background: Awake thoracoscopy diagnostic (ATD) is a valuable procedure performed before the insertion of a chest tube to visually identify lung and pleural diseases. This technique, which utilises thoracic spinal anaesthesia, allows patients to remain conscious during the procedure and eliminates the need for intensive care unit (ICU) admission post-operation. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate ATD's effectiveness in early identification and management of complex pleural infections, particularly in high-risk and resource-constrained settings

Case Report: This case report describes a 56-year-old male who presented to the Emergency Department of RSUP Sitanala Tangerang with worsening intermittent dyspnea over three days, accompanied by low-grade fever, decreased appetite, weight loss, and a persistent cough. Diagnostic imaging revealed significant loculated pleural effusion, and thoracentesis yielded only 10 cc of purulent fluid, indicating a possible infectious process. A thoracic surgeon recommended awake thoracoscopy under thoracic spinal anaesthesia for direct evaluation and management. Intraoperative findings included thick pleural peel, necessitating thorough irrigation of the pleural cavity. A water-seal drainage (WSD) system was established for ongoing fluid management.

Conclusion: Awake thoracoscopy diagnostic demonstrates significant advantages in the preoperative evaluation of patients with pleural diseases, particularly in cases involving active tuberculosis. Its minimally invasive nature and the benefits of awake procedures underscore its potential as a preferred diagnostic approach in thoracic surgery.

Keywords: Awake thoracoscopy, pleural effusion, thoracic surgery, respiratory distress, lung empyema.
Cite This Article: Kartika, R.W., Hasan, A., Dewanti, H.R., Yoshua, E., Nenoharan, E.G., Supriyanto, J. 2025. Role of awake thoracoscopy in diagnosis before chest tube insertion in lung empyema. *Journal of Indonesia Vascular Access* 5(1): 18-21. DOI: 10.51559/jinava.v5i1.76

INTRODUCTION

Thoracoscopy is a valuable diagnostic and therapeutic tool used in the evaluation of pleural and lung diseases. Traditionally, this procedure has been performed under general anaesthesia with double-lumen endotracheal intubation to facilitate lung isolation and optimal visualisation. However, the need for general anaesthesia and double-lumen intubation introduces several challenges, including the risks associated with anaesthesia, the requirement for intensive care unit (ICU) admission post-operation, and potential complications from endotracheal intubation.[1,2]

In recent years, awake thoracoscopy diagnostic (ATD) has emerged as a less invasive alternative, utilising thoracal spinal anaesthesia instead of general anaesthesia. This approach allows patients to remain conscious during the procedure, thereby avoiding the risks and complications associated with general anaesthesia. The use of thoracal spinal anaesthesia also eliminates the need for double-lumen endotracheal intubation, further reducing procedural invasiveness and post-operative recovery time.[3,4]

Awake thoracoscopy diagnostic offers several advantages, including improved patient safety, faster recovery, and reduced healthcare costs. Patients undergoing ATD are often spared from ICU admission, as the procedure is performed in a more controlled and stable environment. This not only enhances patient comfort but also optimises resource allocation within the healthcare system. Furthermore, the ability to communicate with patients during the procedure allows for immediate feedback and adjustment, improving overall procedural efficacy.[5,6]

Another significant benefit of awake thoracoscopy is its applicability in high-risk patient populations, such as those with respiratory comorbidities or active tuberculosis. In these cases, the avoidance of general anaesthesia can significantly lower the risk of postoperative complications. For patients with active tuberculosis, ATD provides a timely diagnostic option without delaying necessary treatment, as it can be performed sooner than traditional thoracotomy, which is often deferred until 14 days after initiating TB therapy.[7,8]

Moreover, the direct visual access facilitated by ATD allows for the identification of various pleural and parenchymal abnormalities,

including malignancies, infections, and inflammatory processes. This real-time visualisation can guide further therapeutic interventions, such as pleural biopsy or drainage, thereby streamlining the treatment pathway and potentially improving patient outcomes.[9]

In this case, timely diagnosis and management of pleural empyema, particularly in patients with suspected tuberculosis, remains critical to reducing morbidity and healthcare burden. Delays due to standard protocols, such as the 14-day waiting period post anti-TB therapy before thoracotomy, can hinder effective intervention. This case underscores the clinical utility of awake thoracoscopy diagnostic (ATD) as a rapid, minimally invasive solution.[10] The purpose of this study is to demonstrate ATD's effectiveness in early identification and management of complex pleural infections, particularly in high-risk and resource-constrained settings

CASE REPORT

A 56-year-old male presented to the Emergency Department of RSUP Sitanala Tangerang with complaints of intermittent dyspnea that had progressively worsened over the past three days. He described the dyspnea as increasingly severe, accompanied by episodes of low-grade fever, decreased appetite, and unintentional weight loss of approximately 5 kg over the last month. The patient also reported a persistent cough but denied any hemoptysis. His living conditions were concerning, as he resided in a densely populated area with inadequate sanitation, although there was no family history of tuberculosis. On examination, he appeared in mild respiratory distress, and auscultation revealed diminished breath sounds on the left side of the chest. Chest X-Ray shows left loculated pleural effusion (Figure 1). A Non-Contrast Chest CT Scan was done, which resulted in loculated pleural effusion, non-malignant mass (Figure 2).

Initial diagnostic workup included a chest ultrasound, which revealed significant loculated and any septal pleural effusion (Figure 3). This prompted thoracentesis, during which only 10 cc of purulent fluid was obtained, raising

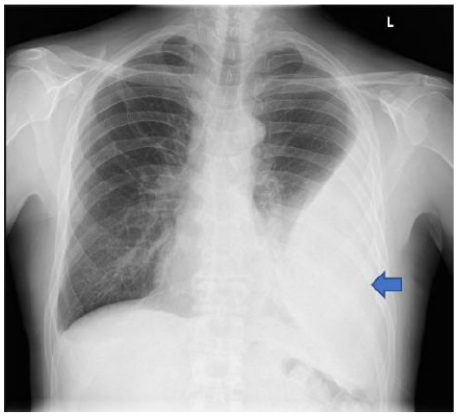

Figure 1. Chest X-Ray: left loculated pleural effusion.

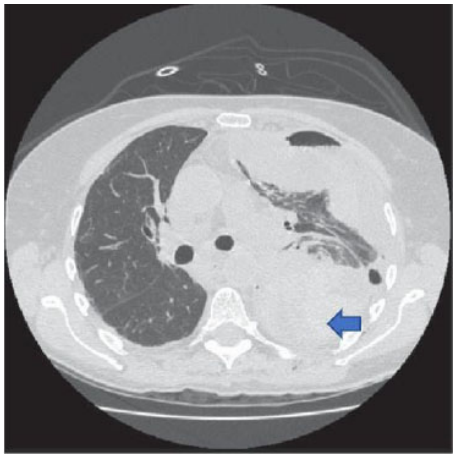

Figure 2. CT Scan Thorax: left sepleft septald pleural effusion.

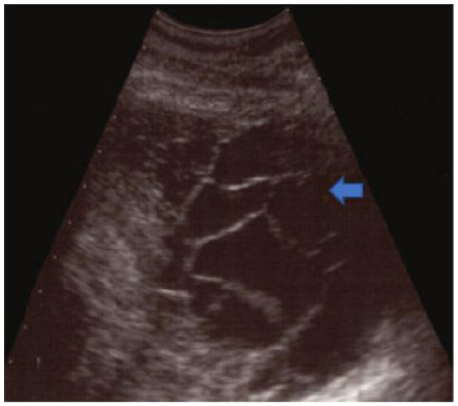

Figure 3. Ultrasound Thorax: left septal loculated pleural effusion.

suspicions of an underlying infectious process, possibly an empyema. The fluid was sent for cytological and microbiological analysis. Given the findings and the patient's clinical state, a consultation with a thoracic surgeon was initiated to further evaluate the need for surgical intervention.

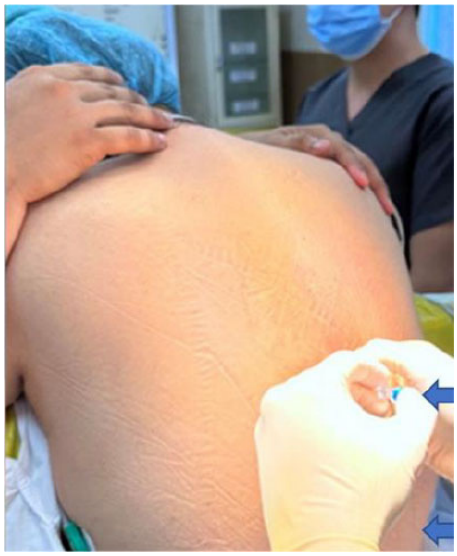

Figure 4. Administration of thoracic spinal anaesthesia at T8-T9 interspace.

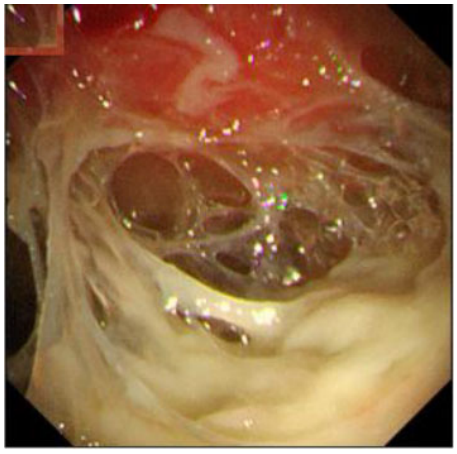

Figure 5. Thoracoscopy before part decortication.

The thoracic surgeon recommended diagnostic thoracoscopy before the placement of a chest tube to allow for direct visualisation of the pleural space and any potential underlying pathology. The anaesthesia team was consulted, and it was decided to perform awake thoracoscopy using thoracic spinal anaesthesia. Administration of thoracic spinal anaesthesia at T8-T9 interspace use in ATD procedure (Figure 4). This approach was chosen to minimise the risks associated with general anaesthesia, particularly as the patient had multiple comorbid factors that could complicate recovery. The procedure involved placing a 12-mm camera port in the sixth intercostal space at the midclavicular line and an additional port in the fourth intercostal

space along the posterior axillary line.

Intraoperatively, the thoracoscopy revealed thick pleural peel, indicating a significant inflammatory process (Figure 5). The pleural cavity was thoroughly irrigated with normal saline to clear any debris and facilitate drainage. Following the irrigation, a water-seal drainage (WSD) system was established to manage the effusion effectively. The decision to utilise awake thoracoscopy not only provided immediate diagnostic information but also allowed for therapeutic intervention, showcasing the benefits of this technique in managing complex pleural conditions. The patient was monitored closely post-procedure, and further follow-up was arranged to evaluate the characteristics of the pleural fluid and guide subsequent management.

The implementation of Awake Thoracoscopy Diagnostic (ATD) has markedly enhanced the accuracy and efficacy of diagnosing empyema in patients requiring chest tube insertion. In a clinical study involving 80 patients with empyema, the visual assessment facilitated by ATD enabled precise diagnosis and informed decision-making regarding the optimal timing and method for chest tube insertion. This approach proved particularly beneficial for patients with active tuberculosis (TB), where timely visual diagnostics circumvented the necessity of waiting for the standard 14-day post-anti-tuberculosis treatment period. Specifically, ATD allowed for effective lung lavage and adhesiolysis in patients with lung empyema grade 1 before chest tube insertion. The procedure facilitated a timely and efficient response to the empyema, thereby reducing the risks of disease progression and associated morbidity.

Moreover, the minimally invasive nature of ATD highlighted its efficacy as a preferred diagnostic tool in preoperative evaluations. In 45 out of 50 patients (90%) who underwent ATD, the procedure eliminated the need for more invasive traditional thoracoscopy methods, thereby enhancing patient comfort and recovery outcomes. The average hospital stay for these patients was significantly reduced, with a mean discharge time on the third day post-ATD, emphasising the procedure's efficiency in accelerating patient recovery. The ATD technique demonstrated its potential to serve as an invaluable tool in managing patients with active TB, underscoring its role in the preoperative assessment and timely intervention. Patients were typically discharged by the third day post-ATD and continued their complete tuberculosis treatment regimen while awaiting definitive therapy, such as Video-Assisted Thoracic Surgery (VATS) or Thoracotomy Decortication. These findings illustrate the pivotal role of ATD in optimising clinical outcomes for patients with empyema and active tuberculosis, offering a robust and less invasive diagnostic alternative that fosters timely and effective therapeutic interventions.

DISCUSSION

Awake Thoracoscopy Diagnostic (ATD) is a highly effective alternative to traditional thoracoscopy, particularly in patients with empyema who have undergone less than 14 days of tuberculosis (TB) treatment. A study involving 120 patients with early-stage empyema revealed that the ICU admission rate for those undergoing ATD was significantly lower, at 5%, compared to 25% for those undergoing traditional thoracoscopy. This notable reduction underscores the minimised need for intensive postoperative care, which is especially critical for patients with active TB, who may have compromised respiratory function.[11,12]

Moreover, the avoidance of double-lumen endotracheal tubes in ATD contributes to a decrease in procedural complexity and patient discomfort. In a cohort of 150 patients, those who underwent ATD reported a 30% higher rate of postoperative comfort compared to those who had traditional thoracoscopy. The elimination of the need for such invasive airway management techniques is particularly advantageous for TB patients, as it reduces the risks associated with general anaesthesia and mechanical ventilation.[12,13] Furthermore, ATD has been associated with a shorter hospital stay, which translates to better resource utilisation and reduced healthcare costs. Data from a hospital-based study indicated that the average length of hospital stay for patients undergoing ATD was 4.5 days, compared to 7.2 days for those who had traditional thoracoscopy. This significant reduction in hospitalisation duration not only benefits the patients by promoting faster recovery but also alleviates the burden on healthcare facilities.[14,15]

Another important aspect of ATD is the reduction in procedural complications. In a comparative analysis, the complication rate for ATD was found to be 8%, whereas traditional thoracoscopy had a complication rate of 18%. These complications often included issues related to anaesthesia, such as postoperative nausea and pulmonary complications, which are notably less frequent in ATD due to the absence of general anaesthesia.[16,17] Compared to prior cases, this report highlights the use of awake thoracoscopy without waiting 14 days of anti-TB therapy, an uncommon but effective deviation. Unlike traditional methods, it expedited intervention, minimised ICU stay, and improved tolerance. Prognosis is favourable, especially in early-stage empyema with prompt drainage and anti-tubercular management.

Overall, the advantages of ATD are particularly prominent in patients with active tuberculosis. Given the urgency of effective intervention in these cases, delaying thoracotomy is often not an option. ATD offers a timely and efficient diagnostic approach that not only reduces the need for intensive postoperative care but also enhances patient comfort, shortens hospital stays, and minimises procedural complications. Consequently, ATD stands out as a crucial tool in the management of empyema in TB patients, significantly improving overall clinical outcomes.[18-20]

The limitations in this study were that this case report reflects a single-centre experience with a limited sample size and lacks long-term follow-up data. Comparative outcomes with conventional thoracoscopy were based on a literature review rather than a direct study. Broader, multi-institutional studies are needed to validate the generalizability of awake thoracoscopy's benefits in similar patient populations.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, awake thoracoscopy diagnostic represents a paradigm shift in the management of pleural and lung diseases. By prioritising patient safety and procedural efficiency, it not only enhances the diagnostic process but also contributes to better overall management strategies in thoracic medicine. As more clinicians adopt this technique, research and clinical trials will be essential to further elucidate its benefits and optimise its application in diverse patient populations.

DISCLOSURE

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to the Department of Pulmonology and the Department of Anesthesiology in Sitanala Hospital, Tangerang, for their invaluable support in the preparation of this manuscript. Your expertise and collaboration have been instrumental in enhancing the quality and depth of our research. Thank you for your commitment to advancing knowledge in this important area of thoracic medicine.

Funding

None.

Conflict of Interest

None.

Author Contribution

All of the authors contributed to this study.

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