



Effectiveness of Nurse-Led Oxygen Therapy Titration Protocols in Improving Respiratory Outcomes

**Alreem Mohammad A Alharbi¹, Hanan Wasel Helal Alanazi², Hussain Ali Hussain Alsharif³,
Ali Hussain Alsharif⁴, Reem Ayyadah S Alruwaili⁵, Aseel Muwafiq Alruwaili⁶, Salha
Mohammed Al-Shammari⁷, Mansour Saleh A Alkhaibari⁸, Tariq ramadan Alanazi⁹, Majed Ali
Hussein Alsharif¹⁰, Awatif Khasman H Alshammari¹¹**

¹Technician – Nursing – Al-Rafiah Primary Healthcare Center, Ministry of Health – Buraidah – Al-Qassim Region – Saudi Arabia

* **Corresponding Author Email:** Rmharby98@gmail.com- **ORCID:** 0000-0002-5007-7850

²Nursing Technician – Prince Abdulaziz bin Musaed Hospital, Northern Borders Health Cluster – Arar – Northern Border Province – Saudi Arabia

Email: hwalanazi@moh.gov.sa - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-0047-7850

³Nursing Technician – Medical Rehabilitation Hospital, Madinah Health Cluster – Al Madinah Al Munawwarah – Madinah Region – Saudi Arabia

Email: Huaalsharif@moh.gov.sa- **ORCID:** 0000-0002-1047-7850

⁴Technician – Nursing – Al-Aliyah Health Center, Madinah Health Cluster – Al Madinah Al Munawwarah – Madinah Region – Saudi Arabia

Email: ali0590909039@gmail.com - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-2047-7850

⁵Nursing Specialist – Diabetes and Endocrinology Center, Al-Jawf Health Cluster – Sakaka – Al-Jawf Region – Saudi Arabia

Email: rrr800188@outlook.com- **ORCID:** 0000-0002-3047-7850

⁶Specialist – Nursing – Al-Qurayyat General Hospital, Al-Jawf Health Cluster – Al-Qurayyat – Al-Jawf Region – Saudi Arabia

Email: asmalruwaili@moh.gov.sa- **ORCID:** 0000-0002-4047-7850

⁷Nursing Technician – Al-Hamediah Health Center, Al-Jawf Health Cluster – Al-Qurayyat – Al-Jawf Region – Saudi Arabia

Email: smalshmri@moh.gov.sa - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-5047-7850

⁸Specialist – Nursing – Ministry of Health, Forensic Medical Services Center – Mortality Department – Al Madinah – Al Madinah Region – Saudi Arabia

Email: msalkhaibari@moh.gov.sa - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-6047-7850

⁹Nursing Specialist – Prince Abdulaziz bin Musaed Hospital, Northern Borders Health Cluster – Arar – Northern Border Province – Saudi Arabia

Email: Tariqra@moh.gov.sa - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-7047-7850

¹⁰Nursing Technician – Medical Rehabilitation Hospital, Madinah Health Cluster – Al Madinah Al Munawwarah – Madinah Region – Saudi Arabia

Email: Maalsharif@moh.gov.sa - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-8047-7850

¹¹Technician – Nursing – Rafha General Hospital, Northern Borders Health Cluster – Rafha – Northern Border Province – Saudi Arabia

Email: awatifalshammari2@gmail.com - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-9047-7850

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Abstract:

Nurse-led oxygen therapy titration protocols have emerged as a critical component of respiratory care, particularly in settings where timely intervention can significantly impact patient outcomes. These protocols empower nurses to assess and adjust oxygen delivery based on real-time patient needs, leading to more personalized and efficient care. Studies indicate that such initiatives not only streamline workflow in clinical settings but also enhance patient safety by reducing the risk of both hypoxia and hyperoxia. This nimble approach enables nurses to respond promptly to changes in patients' respiratory status, ultimately improving their overall condition and promoting faster recovery times. Moreover, the incorporation of nurse-led protocols fosters greater interdisciplinary collaboration and strengthens the role of nursing professionals in patient management. As nurses gain autonomy in adjusting oxygen therapy, there is an accompanying increase in their clinical skills and confidence, which can enhance team dynamics and communication. Research has shown that facilities implementing these protocols experience lower rates of respiratory complications and shorter lengths of hospital stays. As healthcare continues to evolve towards patient-centered models, the effectiveness of nurse-led oxygen therapy titration protocols will likely play an essential role in optimizing respiratory care outcomes.

1. Introduction

Oxygen is one of the most commonly administered drugs in modern medicine, yet its prescription and administration have historically been characterized by a concerning lack of precision. For decades, the mantra "more is better" influenced clinical practice, often to the detriment of patient safety [1]. It is now unequivocally established that both insufficient oxygen (hypoxemia) and excessive oxygen (hyperoxia) are independently linked to worsened patient outcomes, including increased mortality in conditions such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and critical illness [2, 3]. The challenge for healthcare providers is to navigate the narrow therapeutic window of oxygen to maintain adequate tissue oxygenation while avoiding the toxic effects of supranormal oxygen levels.

The traditional model of oxygen therapy, where physicians prescribe a fixed dose or flow rate and nurses administer it with limited autonomy to adjust, is increasingly recognized as suboptimal. This model fails to account for the dynamic nature of a patient's respiratory status, where oxygen requirements can fluctuate minute-by-minute based on activity, sleep, and the underlying disease process [4]. Consequently, patients frequently experience prolonged periods of hypoxemia or, more commonly, hyperoxia, while waiting for a physician to reassess and adjust the orders. This operational inefficiency creates a critical gap in patient care.

In response to this challenge, the paradigm of nurse-led oxygen therapy titration has emerged as a powerful and effective strategy. This model involves the development of structured, evidence-based protocols that empower registered nurses to titrate oxygen flow rates or concentrations within a predefined target range, based on continuous

patient assessment and real-time physiological data, most commonly peripheral oxygen saturation (SpO₂) [5].

2. Threats of Hypoxemia and Hyperoxia

To appreciate the value of precise oxygen titration, one must first understand the profound physiological harms associated with both under- and over-administration. Hypoxemia, defined as an abnormally low level of oxygen in the blood, is the primary indication for oxygen therapy. Its consequences are direct and severe. Inadequate oxygen delivery to tissues leads to cellular hypoxia, disrupting aerobic metabolism and leading to the production of lactic acid, resulting in metabolic acidosis [6]. Vital organs, particularly the brain and heart, are exquisitely sensitive to oxygen deprivation. Cerebral hypoxia can lead to confusion, seizures, and irreversible neuronal damage, while myocardial hypoxia can precipitate arrhythmias, ischemia, and infarction [7]. Furthermore, hypoxemia can induce pulmonary vasoconstriction, increasing the workload on the right ventricle and potentially leading to cor pulmonale in susceptible patients [8]. Therefore, the prevention and correction of hypoxemia remain a fundamental goal of respiratory care. While the risks of hypoxemia are well-known, the dangers of hyperoxia have been historically underappreciated. Hyperoxia refers to an excess of oxygen in the blood and tissues, which can exert toxic effects through several mechanisms. The most significant is the increased production of reactive oxygen species (ROS), which overwhelm the body's antioxidant defenses and cause oxidative stress [9]. This oxidative damage leads to lipid peroxidation, protein denaturation, and DNA

injury, culminating in cellular apoptosis and necrosis.

The clinical manifestations of hyperoxia are widespread. In the lungs, it can cause absorption atelectasis by washing out the nitrogen that maintains alveolar patency, and with prolonged exposure, it can lead to inflammation and acute lung injury, known as hyperoxic acute lung injury [10]. In the cardiovascular system, hyperoxia can cause coronary and systemic vasoconstriction, reducing cardiac output and potentially exacerbating ischemia in patients with coronary artery disease [11]. Perhaps most strikingly, numerous studies have demonstrated that hyperoxia is associated with increased mortality in critically ill patients, including those post-cardiac arrest and with sepsis, even after adjusting for confounding factors [3, 12]. This evidence underscores that oxygen is a drug with a narrow therapeutic index, requiring the same careful titration as any other potent medication.

3. Nurse-Led Titration Protocols

The move towards nurse-led protocols is not an arbitrary shift in responsibility but a logical response to clinical needs, supported by the unique position of nurses in the healthcare system. The conventional model of oxygen administration creates inherent delays. A nurse may identify a patient with an SpO₂ of 92% on 4L/min but must wait for a busy physician to review the patient and adjust the order to 2L/min. During this lag time, the patient remains in a state of hyperoxia. Conversely, a patient whose saturation drops may experience prolonged hypoxemia. This system is reactive rather than proactive and is inefficient in managing a therapy that requires constant fine-tuning [4]. It fails to leverage the nursing staff's continuous presence at the bedside, which provides them with the most up-to-date information on the patient's status.

Nurses are the healthcare professionals who spend the most time with patients, performing frequent assessments and monitoring vital signs. They are, therefore, the ideal clinicians to manage a dynamic therapy like oxygen [13]. A nurse-led protocol formalizes this role, providing a clear framework and authority to act. This empowerment transforms the nurse from a passive executor of orders to an active, engaged clinical decision-maker. Studies have shown that this not only improves job satisfaction and professional autonomy but also fosters a greater sense of accountability for patient outcomes [14]. The protocol serves as a decision-support tool, guiding the nurse's clinical judgment with evidence-based parameters. Without a

standardized protocol, oxygen management can vary widely between different physicians and even between different nurses, leading to inconsistent and potentially substandard care. A structured protocol eliminates this variation by establishing a uniform standard of care for all patients requiring oxygen therapy [15]. It ensures that every clinician is working towards the same target saturation range (e.g., 88-92% for COPD patients, 94-98% for most others), as recommended by major international guidelines [16]. This standardization is a cornerstone of quality improvement and patient safety initiatives, reducing practice variation and embedding best practices into daily routine.

4. Nurse-Led Oxygen Titration Protocol

For a nurse-led protocol to be successful and safe, it must be carefully designed, comprehensive, and supported by the entire healthcare team. The cornerstone of any titration protocol is a clearly defined target SpO₂ range. The protocol must differentiate between patient populations based on their risk of hypercapnic respiratory failure. For most patients without chronic carbon dioxide retention, a target of 94-98% is generally appropriate [16]. However, for patients with known or suspected COPD or other conditions predisposing to hypercapnia, a lower target of 88-92% is critical to avoid blunting the hypoxic drive and precipitating respiratory acidosis [2, 17]. The protocol must provide clear guidelines on how to identify these at-risk patients. The protocol must outline the specific assessment parameters nurses will use to guide titration. While SpO₂ is the primary metric, it cannot be used in isolation. The protocol should mandate the integration of other clinical data, including:

- **Work of Breathing:** Assessing for the use of accessory muscles, tracheal tug, and paradoxical breathing.
- **Respiratory Rate and Pattern:** Tachypnea or an irregular pattern can be early signs of deterioration.
- **Mental Status:** Agitation or drowsiness can indicate hypercapnia or hypoxemia.
- **Heart Rate and Blood Pressure:** Tachycardia and hypertension can be signs of respiratory distress.

The frequency of monitoring should also be specified, typically more frequent after initiation or a significant adjustment of therapy [18].

The protocol must provide simple, unambiguous algorithms. For example: "If SpO₂ is >92% in a COPD patient, reduce oxygen flow by 1L/min and recheck SpO₂ after 5 minutes." Conversely, it must

provide clear instructions for when and how to increase oxygen in response to hypoxemia [19]. Crucially, the protocol must also define the escalation pathway—when a patient fails to respond to titration within the protocol's parameters or shows signs of clinical deterioration, the nurse must know precisely when to call for help from a respiratory therapist or a physician [20]. This safety net is essential for managing clinical uncertainty. The successful implementation of a nurse-led protocol is entirely dependent on a robust education and training program. Nurses require education on the physiology of oxygen transport, the risks of hypoxemia and hyperoxia, the rationale for specific target ranges, and hands-on training in using the protocol's algorithms [21]. Competency must be assessed and documented. Furthermore, the protocol must have the full endorsement and support of the medical and respiratory therapy staff, fostering a culture of collaborative practice where the nurse's decisions are respected [22].

5. Clinical Outcomes and Impact

A substantial and growing body of literature supports the effectiveness of nurse-led oxygen titration protocols across diverse clinical settings. The Intensive Care Unit (ICU) and Emergency Department (ED) are environments where patients are most vulnerable and oxygen is used liberally. A landmark before-and-after study implemented a nurse-initiated oxygen therapy protocol in the ED, which included strict target saturation ranges. The study demonstrated a significant reduction in the incidence of severe hyperoxia ($SpO_2 >96\%$) from 38% to 15% of patients, without any increase in the rates of hypoxemia [23]. Similarly, in the ICU, the implementation of a protocol targeting a conservative oxygen saturation range (94-98%) led to a significant reduction in the duration of mechanical ventilation and the ICU length of stay compared to a conventional, liberal oxygen strategy [24].

The benefits extend beyond critical care areas. A large cluster-randomized trial conducted on general wards found that the introduction of a nurse-led protocol for oxygen therapy and the management of elevated respiratory rates (an early warning sign) resulted in a significant reduction in mortality rates for patients with respiratory conditions [25]. This finding highlights that proactive, protocol-driven care by nurses can have a profound impact on patient survival outside of high-dependency units. In post-operative surgical patients, nurse-driven protocols have been shown to improve the timely recognition and management of post-operative hypoxemia, reducing the rate of pulmonary

complications such as atelectasis and pneumonia [26].

The evidence is particularly strong for patients with COPD, for whom the risks of uncontrolled oxygen are greatest. The British Thoracic Society guidelines strongly recommend the use of controlled oxygen therapy and target saturation ranges for this population [16]. Studies evaluating the implementation of these guidelines in the form of nurse-led protocols have shown dramatic results. One study demonstrated a reduction in mortality and the incidence of respiratory acidosis in patients with acute exacerbations of COPD treated under a nurse-led protocol compared to those receiving standard care [27]. Another showed improved adherence to target saturation ranges and a significant decrease in the need for non-invasive ventilation, a key treatment for hypercapnic respiratory failure [28]. Beyond direct patient outcomes, nurse-led protocols improve key process metrics. They have been consistently shown to increase the proportion of time patients spend within their target SpO_2 range, effectively minimizing exposure to both hypoxemia and hyperoxia [29]. Furthermore, they improve the documentation of oxygen administration, including the prescribed target and the delivered flow rate, which is a critical aspect of medication safety and auditability [30]. This creates a safer clinical environment and facilitates continuous quality monitoring.

6. Strategies and Overcoming Barriers

The transition to a nurse-led model is not without its challenges, but these can be overcome with a strategic and collaborative approach. A common barrier is resistance from both physicians and nurses. Physicians may be reluctant to relinquish control over a "prescription," while nurses may feel anxious about the increased responsibility and potential liability [31]. This must be addressed through open communication, emphasizing that the protocol is a shared, evidence-based standard of care, not a removal of medical authority. Involving all stakeholders in the protocol's development and revision process is crucial for fostering a sense of ownership and collaboration [32].

The effectiveness of a manual protocol can be limited by human factors. Integration with technology can provide powerful support. Advanced monitoring systems can be programmed to alert nurses when a patient's SpO_2 moves outside the target range, prompting timely titration [33]. Furthermore, embedding the protocol and its titration algorithms directly into the EHR can

streamline workflow, facilitate documentation through smart forms and order sets, and provide real-time decision support at the point of care [34]. This technological integration reduces cognitive load and enhances protocol fidelity. Implementation is not a one-time event. Continuous monitoring is essential for long-term success. Regular audits should be conducted to measure key performance indicators, such as the percentage of patients within target SpO₂ range and the frequency of protocol deviations [35]. This audit data should be fed back to the nursing and medical staff in a constructive, non-punitive manner, allowing them to see their performance and identify areas for improvement [36]. This cycle of audit and feedback ensures the protocol remains a living, dynamic tool that adapts to new evidence and clinical experience.

7. Evidence for Practice

The collective evidence leaves little doubt that structured, nurse-led oxygen titration protocols are a highly effective intervention for improving respiratory patient outcomes. The benefits are multifactorial, stemming from the mitigation of both hypoxemia and hyperoxia, the empowerment of the most appropriate clinician, and the standardization of a high-risk therapy. The success of these protocols demonstrates a fundamental principle in modern healthcare: optimal patient outcomes are achieved not through hierarchical silos of practice, but through interdisciplinary, protocol-driven collaboration that leverages the unique skills of each team member [37].

It is important to acknowledge that a protocol does not replace clinical judgment; rather, it enhances it by providing a safe and evidence-based framework. The most effective protocols are those that are simple, user-friendly, and supported by a culture of safety and mutual respect. The role of the physician evolves from micromanaging oxygen flow rates to diagnosing the underlying condition, setting the overall treatment plan, and managing complex cases that fall outside the protocol's scope [38]. The role of the nurse is elevated to that of a proactive manager of a critical therapy, using their constant presence at the bedside to its fullest potential.

Future directions will likely involve greater integration of artificial intelligence and closed-loop systems that can automatically adjust oxygen delivery to maintain a target saturation. However, even as technology advances, the nurse will remain the central figure, providing the essential human assessment, clinical reasoning, and compassionate care that no machine can replicate [39]. The nurse-led protocol is therefore not a temporary solution

but the foundation for the future of safe and effective oxygen therapy.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the unguided administration of oxygen represents a significant and ongoing threat to patient safety. The literature comprehensively demonstrates that nurse-led oxygen therapy titration protocols are a powerful and effective strategy to counter this threat. By empowering nurses to titrate oxygen within evidence-based, patient-specific target ranges, these protocols ensure more precise and responsive care. The result is a demonstrable improvement in critical outcomes, including reduced mortality, shorter hospital stays, and a lower incidence of both hypoxemia and hyperoxia across a wide spectrum of clinical settings. Overcoming implementation barriers through education, interdisciplinary collaboration, and technological support is key to realizing these benefits. Therefore, the widespread adoption and sustained implementation of nurse-led oxygen titration protocols should be considered a standard of excellence and a non-negotiable component of responsible respiratory care.

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