Evaluation of the time-dependent effects of factors influencing the hazard of disease recurrence in tuberculosis patients

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Abstract

Background & Aims: There are variables whose influence on the risk of tuberculosis (TB) recurrence change over time. Therefore, this study aimed to assess the time-dependent effects of these variables on the hazard of TB recurrence.

Materials & Methods: In this historical cohort study, data were collected from 4,564 TB patients who were referred to the TB research center of Dr. Masih Daneshvari Hospital, Tehran, from 2005 to 2015, in order to evaluate factors affecting the hazard of TB recurrence in terms of time dependency or time constancy. Data were analyzed in STATA 14 software using a statistical test based on Schoenfeld residuals, the time-dependent effects method, and the time-varying effects model (considering time function as $f(t) = t$).

Results: The results showed that only the impact of the variables of drug adverse effects and passive smoker were inconstant over time and had time-dependent effects, and they also influenced the hazard of TB recurrence. Also, the effect of the two mentioned variables on the hazard of TB recurrence displayed a decreasing and increasing trend with time, respectively.

Conclusion: Using the time-varying effects model in the study of the hazard of TB recurrence allows evaluating the time-dependent effects of the studied variables and also can differentiate them from the time-independent variables.

Keywords: Recurrence, Time-dependent effects, Time-varying effects model, Tuberculosis

Introduction

Recurrence of tuberculosis (TB) is the reappearance of this disease in a person who appears to be cured. Patients who take their medicine on a daily basis and complete their treatment plan have a very low chance of recurrence. Therefore, these patients do not need follow-up after ending the treatment period (1-2). Recurrence of the disease often occurs within the first few years after the treatment ending and is generally accompanied by clinical symptoms; hence, patients should be treated in shortest time possible following symptoms recurrence (1,3). Clinical trials have shown that the quality of care provided for patients and the treatments considered by physicians have a significant impact on the recurrence of TB.

TB recurrence can generally be classified into three categories: relapse (patients who have previously been cured but have recently presented with positive sputum), treatment failure (patients who have positive sputum after five months of taking medication or have become positive after being negative during this period of treatment), and absence of treatment (patients who have stopped taking their medication) (1,4). The main causes of TB recurrence are incomplete treatment, misdiagnosis, voluntary discharge, nosocomial infection, temporary discharge, and disease complications (5-7). However, there is a wide range of individual, demographic and clinical characteristics of patients that can be effective in the disease recurrence and the failure of treatment strategies (1-4, 8). Despite comprehensive research on TB and its recurrence, the mentioned causes have received little attention (2-3, 9).

The effect of variables on the risk of TB recurrence are divided into two categories in terms of changes over time, constant (time-independent) and inconstant (time-dependent) variables. In most studies related to TB recurrence, data analysis has been designed assuming that the effects of the influencing factors are constant over time (10-12, 6). In the absence of this assumption for some variables, the estimates obtained from the study are erroneous. Researchers have paid more attention to the impact of the time-independent variables on TB recurrence due to its simplicity in the

clinical interpretention (12). However, it should be noted that the lack of attention to the time-dependent effects of the studied variables can create a clinically incomplete understanding of the mechanism of the hazard of TB recurrence (13-15). Failure to consider the time-dependent variables related to TB recurrence will not only lead to inaccurate inferences about TB but also deprive researchers of the possibility of careful studying the behavior of time-dependent effects of related variables in the recurrence of TB (13-15).

Various statistical methods have been designed to study the effect of variables on different events such as TB recurrence. The Cox regression model is one of the most common of these statistical approaches (1, 8, 16-18). Another method is time-varying effects model, a generalization of the Cox regression model, which studies the time-dependent effects of the studied variables (15, 19-20). The model time-varying effects allows researchers not only to study the time-dependent effects of the studied variables but also to distinguish time-independent from time-dependent variables (13, 15, 20). In this method, by creating a series of interactive factors that includes the interaction between the desired variables and a function of time could fit a model for time-dependent variables (this function f (t) can be in the form of $\ln(t), \sqrt{t}, t, \cdots$) (15, 19, 20).

Studying the time-dependent effects for the hazard of TB recurrence can accurately reveal the time dependence, as well as how risk factors influence it. For instance, suppose the AIDS variable has an incremental effect on the TB recurrence over time. According to the fixed effects model, there is no obvious difference in the risk of TB recurrence between a patient who has had AIDS for one year and a patient who has had AIDS for five years in terms of the risk of TB recurrence. In this model, no relationship exists between the variables AIDS and time, and it is not the same as the time-dependent effects model. Based on this model, a patient with a five-year history of AIDS is more likely to have TB recurrence than a patient with a one-year history of AIDS. As a result, to better understand TB recurrence and the influence of related factors, the effects of factors related to the

hazard of TB recurrence overtime must be taken into consideration. Thus, the present study was aimed to evaluate the time-dependent effects of factors affecting the hazard of disease recurrence in TB patients who referred to the Tuberculosis and Lung Diseases Research Center of Dr. Masih Daneshvari Hospital, Tehran, Iran.
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Materials & Methods

This retrospective cohort study was conducted in Dr. Masih Daneshvari Hospital from 2005 to 2015. The data of this study were obtained from the medical records of 4,564 TB patients who referred to and were treated by the National Institute of TB and Lung Disease Research Center of this hospital. These patients were studied after treatment and recovery, and the disease recurrence was considered the study event based on sputum culture and the clinical physician's opinion. Patients' information was collected to follow their status until the disease recurrence. The last follow-up of the patients who were discharged without a history of recurrence was carried out through a telephone contact. Patients without disease recurrence until the end of the study and after that (no information was available about them) and patients whose information was complete until the end of the study and indicated no disease recurrence were censored.

In the present study, the impact of factors such as gender, age, marital status, education level, residency area, nationality, family size, medicine adverse effects, smoking, exposure to secondhand smoke (passive smoker), history of drug use, contact with a TB patient, imprisonment, pulmonary and extra-pulmonary TB,

diabetic mellitus, HIV-positive, and comorbidities was assessed for the hazard of TB recurrence in terms of time dependency or time constancy. All the data were analyzed in STATA 14 software using a statistical test based on Schoenfeld residuals, the time-dependent effects method, and the time-varying effects model (considering time function as f (t) = t). A level of 5% was considered as statistically significant.

Results

This study was performed on 4,564 TB patients, of which 166 (3.64%) patients experienced a recurrence of the disease as the desired event after treatment during the study, and 4,398 (96.36%) patients were considered as censored. According to our findings, the majority of the patients were married and illiterate, lived in urban areas, and were Iranian nationals. A small percentage of patients had a history of smoking, drug use, contact with TB patient, imprisonment, and cigarette smoke.

As per the results of the study, most of the patients had pulmonary TB, with only a small percentage having extra-pulmonary TB. In addition, a small percentage of patients in this study had a history of diabetes, AIDS, and comorbidities such as cancer, liver disorders, and so on. Furthermore, the patients' conditions were almost the same in terms of gender variables and medicines adverse effects during the study. The findings of this study also revealed that the age distribution of patients, with an average of about 52 years, was almost similar. The variable household number, with an average of about four people, was also the same (Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of individual, demographic and clinical variables of TB patients

Factors	Category	N (%)	Mean (SD)
Gender	Female	2282 (50.00)	
	Male	2282 (50.00)	
Age	-	-	51.78 (21.47)
Marital Status	Single	914 (20.04)	
	Married	2933 (64.32)	
	Widow	606 (13.29)	
	Divorced	107 (2.35)	
Education	Illiterate	2119 (46.46)	

Factors	Category	N (%)	Mean (SD)
	Primary	914 (20.04)	
	Secondary	743 (16.29)	
	High School	558 (12.23)	
	Higher education	227 (4.98)	
Residency area	Rural	790 (17.33)	
	Urban	3768 (82.67)	
Nationality	Iranian	3623 (79.38)	
	Non-Iranian	941 (20.62)	
Family size	-	-	3.81 (2.10)
Adverse effect	No	2241 (49.10)	
	Yes	2323 (50.90)	
Smoker	No	3239 (71.64)	
	Yes	1282 (28.36)	
Passives smoker	No	3953 (90.13)	
	Yes	433 (9.87)	
Drug user	No	3585 (79.26)	
	Yes	938 (20.74)	
TB contact	No	3706 (81.20)	
	Yes	858 (18.80)	
Imprisoned	No	4212 (92.29)	
	Yes	352 (7.71)	
Pulmonary TB	No	426 (9.34)	
	Yes	4135 (90.66)	
Extra-pulmonary	No	3816 (83.67)	
	Yes	745 (16.33)	
Diabetic mellitus	No	3712 (81.33)	
	Yes	852 (18.67)	
HIV positive	No	4317 (94.59)	
	Yes	247 (5.41)	
Co morbidities	No	3259 (71.41)	
	Yes	1305 (28.59)	

In the present study, a Schoenfeld residuals test was used to evaluate and detect variables with constant-over-time effects and with time-varying effects. Based on the results of this test, only the variables of drug adverse effect and exposure to cigarette smoke (passives smoker) had time-dependent effects among the study variables, while the effect of other variables was not time-dependent (Table 2). In addition, studying the results of the time-varying effects model, which is one of the generalizations of the Cox model in the absence of the assumption of fixed effects, showed that only variables of drug adverse effect and passives smoker were among the factors affecting the hazard of TB recurrence. The results of this model also exhibited that the variables drug adverse effects (β = -0.34) and passives smoker (β = -0 / 72) had a decreasing effect on the hazard of TB recurrence. However, the effects of these variables on the hazard of disease recurrence were inconstant over time and based on the function varied with time. According to the time-varying effects model, the drug adverse effects showed a decreasing trend (β = -0/20), and the effect of the passive smoker variable indicated an increasing trend (β = 0.08) on the hazard of TB recurrence. The results of this model reflected that the variables drug adverse and passive smoker effects decreased and increased the hazard of TB recurrence by exp (-0/34 + (-0/20 × t) and exp (-0/72 + (-0/08 × t) per unit time, respectively. The variables drug adverse effects and cigarette smoke exposure reduced the hazard of TB recurrence by 0.26 times and 0.72 times in the first five years and by 0.58 times and 0.53 times in the first year after treatment, respectively. As a result, the effects of the two above-mentioned variables, i.e. cigarette smoke exposure and

drug adverse effects, compared to the initial times after treatment showed an increasing and decreasing trend, respectively, over time (Table 3). To better understand the effect of time-dependent changes in both aforesaid

variables on the hazard of TB recurrence, we plotted these changes for each variable. According to Figure 1, while both variables reduced the hazard of TB recurrence, the trend of their effect was different.

Table 2. Assessment of time-dependent or time-fixed effects of variables for hazard of recurrence in TB patients

Factor	Estimation	P-value
Gender	0.11	0.24
Age	0.04	0.61
Marital status	0.01	0.88
Education	-0.15	0.14
Residency area	-0.11	0.26
Nationality	-0.05	0.68
Family size	-0.01	0.92
Adverse effect	-0.22	0.03
Smoker	0.02	0.62
Passives smoker	0.46	< 0.005
Drug user	0.05	0.60
TB contact	0.15	0.12
Imprisoned	-0.16	0.07
Pulmonary TB	0.05	0.67
Extra-Pulmonary	-0.10	0.34
Diabetic mellitus	-0.12	0.17
HIV positive	0.08	0.47
Comorbidities	-0.09	0.33

Table 3. Results of time-varying effect model for assessing the effect different factors on the hazard of recurrence in TB patients.

Factor	Category	β(SE)	P-value	95% Confidence interval
Time-fixed effects				
Gender	Male/female	-0.11 (0.22)	0.62	(-0.54, 0.32)
Age	-	0.00 (0.01)	0.90	(-0.01, 0.01)
Marital status	Married/single	-0.27 (0.26)	0.29	(-0.78, 0.23)
	Widow/single	-0.60 (0.41)	0.14	(-1.40, 0.20)
	Divorced/single	0.50 (0.39)	0.19	(-0.2 , 1.27)
Education	Primary/illiterate	0.11 (0.23)	0.63	(-0.34, 0.57)
	Secondary/illiterate	0.17 (0.27)	0.54	(-0.36, 0.70)
	High School/illiterate	-0.27 (0.33)	0.41	(-0.92, 0.37)
	Higher education/ Illiterate	-0.35 (0.47)	0.46	(-1.27, 0.57)
Residency area	Urban/rural	0.05 (0.23)	0.82	(-0.40, 0.51)
Nationality	Non-Iranian/Iranian	0.32 (0.28)	0.25	(-0.22, 0.86)
Family size	-	0.03 (0.04)	0.51	(-0.05, 0.11)
Adverse effect	Yes/no	-0.34 (0.24)	0.15	(-0.81, 0.12)
Smoker	Yes/no	0.45 (0.25)	0.07	(-0.04, 0.94)
Passives smoker	Yes/no	-0.72 (0.46)	0.12	(-1.62, 0.19)
Drug user	Yes/no	0.37 (0.26)	0.15	(-0.14, 0.87)
TB contact	Yes/no	-0.04 (0.21)	0.85	(-0.45, 0.37)
Imprisoned	Yes/no	-0.66 (0.43)	0.13	(-1.51, 0.19)
Pulmonary TB	Yes/no	-0.10 (0.53)	0.85	(-1.14, 0.94)
Extra-pulmonary TB	Yes/no	-0.80 (0.43)	0.06	(-1.64, 0.03)
Diabetic mellitus	Yes/no	-0.05 (0.24)	0.82	(-0.53, 0.42)
HIV positive	Yes/no	-0.10 (0.36)	0.77	(-0.82, 0.61)
Co morbidities	Yes/no	-0.01 (0.21)	0.95	(-0.43, 0.40)
Time-dependent effects				

Adverse effect	Yes/no	-0.20 (0.08)	0.01	(-0.35, -0.04)
Passives smoker	Yes/no	0.08 (0.03)	0.02	(0.01, 0.14)
Imprisoned	Yes/no	0.24 (0.12)	0.06	(-0.01, 0.48)

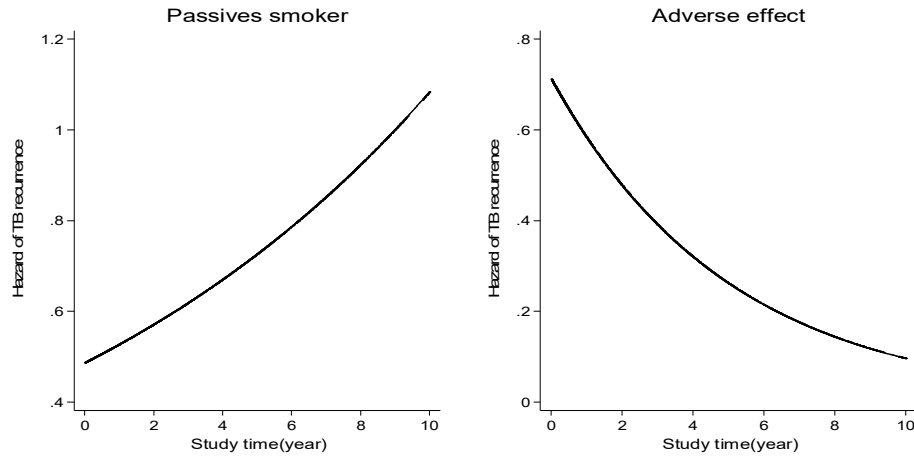Variables in time-dependent effect part interacted with f (t) =t

Fig. 1. Trend of time-dependent effects of adverse effect and passive smoker on the hazard of TB recurrence

Discussion

In many studies that assess the factors influencing the time until the occurrence of a particular event, such as TB recurrence, it is assumed that the effect of variables on the hazard of disease recurrence is constant over time and does not change during the study period. According to this hypothesis, if the results show that some variables affect the hazard of TB recurrence, this effect is constant over time and does not change. In other words, no dependence is considered between the desired variables and time. This assumption is correct when the studied variables have constant effects on time, and their effect on the hazard of TB recurrence is not time-dependent. However, if the effect of these variables is not constant over time and, for example, shows an increasing or decreasing trend over time, it is clear that ignoring this issue can lead to an incomplete and ambiguous understanding of the effect of factors influencing the hazard of TB recurrence.

Despite numerous studies conducted on TB so far, there is no comprehensive information on how factors affect TB recurrence (1-4, 8). The failure to pay attention to time-dependent effects, as well as the use of time-fixed effects models because they are easier to interpret clinically; it has obscured the mechanism of factors affecting the hazard of TB recurrence (1-4, 7, 16, 21, 22). In addition, the misunderstanding of how factors influence the hazard of TB recurrence has made the recurrence issue a public health problem in TB control (8, 23, 24). Unfortunately, most statistical models are designed on the assumption that the effects of the variables being studied are constant, making it impossible to study and evaluate how variables affect events like TB recurrence over time (13, 15, 17, 25). Time-varying effects model is a method considered for studying the time-dependent effects of the studied variables (15, 19-20). This model can identify variables with variable effects over time and allows researchers to evaluate the process of changing the effects of these variables over time (13, 15, 20).

Based on the time-varying effects model, we designed and performed this study to investigate the time-dependent effects of factors influencing the hazard of TB recurrence. According to the results, only drug adverse effects and cigarette smoke exposure had time-dependent effects among a wide range of individual, demographic, and clinical variables. The Schoenfeld residuals test indicated that the effects of these variables on the hazard of TB recurrence did not remain constant over time and changed throughout the study (Table 2). The results of time-varying effects model also revealed that only the two above-mentioned variables were effective on the hazard of TB recurrence (Table 3). Moreover, both variables reduced the risk of TB recurrence, but the process of changing their effects varied with time. For patients with drug adverse effects and cigarette smoke exposure, TB was less likely to recur than in other patients. However, as shown in Figure 1, this trend decreased during the study period for the former variable and increased for the second variable. In this regard, the variable drug adverse effects reduced the hazard of TB recurrence by 0.58 times in the first year, by 0.26 times in the fifth year, and about 10.10 times in the 10th year after treatment. For the cigarette smoke exposure variable, these changes were different. The study findings revealed that secondhand smoke exposure reduced the hazard of TB recurrence by approximately 53.5 times in the first year and 0.72 times in the fifth year after treatment, but increased the hazard of TB recurrence by 1.08 times in the 10th year after treatment.

The findings of this study demonstrated that the variable drug adverse effects always reduced the hazard of TB recurrence, with only the severity of this reduction decreased over time. While the variable cigarette smoke exposure reduced the hazard of TB recurrence in the short term, it had a devastating effect on the patient and increased the hazard of TB recurrence in the long term. Thus, if researchers study the two above-mentioned variables without considering the time-varying effects, they could only conclude that these variables influence the hazard for TB recurrence as reducing or increasing factors; however, they are unable to assess how these variables affect the hazard for the recurrence of TB (13-15). This problem exists in most studies on TB and the factors influencing events such as recurrence, death, and so on. Hence, researchers should consider the possibility of assessing the trend of the variables' impacts with time-dependent effects in these studies, in addition to identifying and separating variables with fixed and variable effects with time. Because researchers are ignoring the time-dependent effects of the studied variables, many clinical aspects associated with TB patients are out of reach.

Conclusion

The use of the time-varying effects model in the study of TB recurrence not only allows researchers to assess the time-dependent effects of the studied variables but also allows them to differentiate variables with fixed and time-varying effects. As a result, this model can provide a better understanding of the mechanism of variable effect in order to control and reduce the incidence.

Data availability

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

Ethical statement

This research was conducted in accordance with ethical principles.

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