The Difficult Airway: Developing a Consistent Approach

Catherine Divingian, MD PhD; Tammy Ferro, DO; Dudith Pierre-Victor, PhD MPH
HCA Healthcare/USF Morsani College of Medicine GME Programs

Introduction

The primary objectives were to determine the best practices in managing difficult airways (DAs) and to generate a simplified algorithm for a consistent approach. Additional objectives included organizing a DA cart, and integrating the information into the electronic medical record (EMR).

A DA is found in a patient in which any of the following situations occur:
- Can’t intubate, can oxygenate
- Secured airway that fails
- 3 or more failed attempts to intubate

DAs are estimated to occur in 3-15% - or more – of all intubation procedures (SOPs) for every facility for quality improvement (QI) attempts. This research was supported (in whole or in part) by HCA and/or an HCA affiliated entity. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the official views of HCA or any of its affiliated entities.

When approaching the DA, it is important to have a variety of techniques available. A scale-up technique was determined to be the best approach from the literature. This was gleaned from a variety of algorithms, which were consolidated into a simplified, cohesive algorithm (see Figure 1):

![Figure 1. A simplified algorithm to scale up to approach the DA.](image)

When attempting to secure an airway, the practitioner starts at the bottom of the cascade and “scales up” to the top, attempting different approaches.

Each technique must be evaluated in the context of the patient presentation, as there are advantages and limitations to any approach.

Novel airway tools outside of the algorithm may help with the DA:
- Fiberscopes and intubating stylets
- Retrograde intubation could help in the case of patients with narrow oral openings
- The most successful novel tool involves the use of lighted stylets, enabling at least 96% of DAs to be intubated when clinically indicated

Scale-Up Technique

The Organized DA Cart

It is a good idea to plan and organize a DA cart that stands ready for airway challenges (see Figure 2 for an example). The drawers can be organized using lean methodologies as follows:
- Top: Algorithms, important phone numbers
- 1st Drawer: 3 P’s (preoxygenation, pretreatment, paralysis/induction)
- 2nd Drawer: Intubation supplies
- 3rd Drawer: Supraglottic airways
- 4th Drawer: Surgical airway supplies
- Side: Longer bougies

Electronic Medical Record Integration

One of the best predictors of a DA is a prior challenge, with a positive predictive value up to 78%, underscoring the need for proper documentation into the EMR to avoid making the same mistakes.

One method is to leverage “dot phrases”- templates that can be inserted into notes. This can include any of the four main DA techniques, physical exam findings and medical history that contributed, and the number of attempts for each approach.

Consider flagging DAs in the Allergies section of the EMR.

References