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Respiratory rate-oxygenation index on the 3rd day is the best predictor of treatment failure in COVID-19 patients

Federico Raimondi,[1] Stefano Centanni,[2,3] Fabrizio Luppi[4,5] Stefano Aliberti,[6,7] Francesco Blasi,[3,8] Paola Rogliani,[9,10] Claudio Micheletto,[11] Marco Contoli,[12] Alessandro Sanduzzi Zamparelli,[13] Marialuisa Bocchino,[13] Paolo Busatto,[14] Luca Novelli,[1] Simone Pappacena,[1,3] Luca Malandrino,[1,3] Giorgio Lorini,[1] Greta Cairoli,[15] Fabiano Di Marco[1,3]

[1]Respiratory Medicine Unit, ASST Papa Giovanni XXIII, Bergamo; [2]Respiratory Medicine Unit, ASST Santi Paolo e Carlo, Milan; [3]University of Milan; [4]Department of Medicine and Surgery, University of Milan Bicocca, Milan; [5]Respiratory Disease Unit, Fondazione IRCCS San Gerardo dei Tintori, Monza; [6]Department of Biomedical Sciences, Humanitas University, Pieve Emanuele; [7]Respiratory Unit, IRCCS Humanitas Research Hospital, Rozzano, Milan; [8]Respiratory Unit and Adult Cystic Fibrosis Center, Fondazione IRCCS Cà Granda Ospedale Maggiore Policlinico, Milan; [9]"Tor Vergata" University, Rome; [10]Unit of Respiratory Medicine, "Tor Vergata" Hospital Foundation, Rome; [11]Respiratory Medicine Unit, University Hospital of Verona; [12]Department of Translational Medicine, University of Ferrara; [13]Department of Clinical Medicine and Surgery, Section of Respiratory Diseases, University Federico II, Azienda Ospedaliera dei Colli-Monaldi Hospital, Naples; [14]Pneumology, Ospedale di Lucca, Azienda USL Toscana Nord Ovest, Lucca; [15]FROM Research Foundation, Papa Giovanni XXIII Hospital, Bergamo, Italy

Correspondence: Luca Novelli, Pulmonary Medicine Unit, ASST Papa Giovanni XXIII, Piazza OMS 1 – 24127 Bergamo, Italy.
Tel.: +39 3394443927.
E-mail: lnovelli@asst-pg23.it

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Abstract

Predictors of outcomes are essential to identifying severe COVID-19 cases and optimizing treatment and care settings. The respiratory rate-oxygenation (ROX) index, originally introduced for predicting the failure of non-invasive support in acute hypoxemic respiratory failure (AHRF), has not been extensively studied over time during hospitalization. This multicenter prospective observational study analyzed COVID-19-related AHRF patients admitted to eight Italian hospitals during the second pandemic wave. The study assessed the ROX index using receiver operator characteristic curves and areas under the curve with 95% confidence intervals to predict treatment failure, defined as endotracheal intubation (ETI) or death.

A total of 227 patients (69.2% males) were enrolled, with a median arterial partial pressure of oxygen (PaO2)/fraction of inspired oxygen (FiO2) ratio at admission of 248 (interquartile range: 170-295). Nearly one-third (29.5%) required ETI or died during hospitalization. Those who experienced treatment failure were older (median age 70 *versus* 61 years, p<0.001), more likely to be current or former smokers (8.5% *versus* 6.4% and 42.4% *versus* 25.5%, p=0.039), had a higher prevalence of cardiovascular diseases (74.6% *versus* 46.3%, p<0.001), and had a lower PaO2/FiO2 ratio at presentation (median 229 *versus* 254, p=0.014). Gender, body mass index, and other comorbidities showed no significant differences.

In patients who failed treatment, the ROX index was higher at presentation and worsened sharply by days 3 and 4. Conversely, in patients who survived without requiring ETI, the ROX index remained stable and reduced after 5-6 days. The ROX index's predictive ability improved notably by the third day of hospitalization, with the best cut-off value identified at 8.53 (sensitivity 75%, specificity 68%). Kaplan-Meier curves indicated that a ROX index of 8.53 or lower on days 1, 2, or 3 was associated with a higher risk of treatment failure. Thus, a single ROX index assessment on day 3 is more informative than its variability over time, with values of 8.53 or lower predicting non-invasive respiratory support failure in hospitalized COVID-19 patients.

Key words: ROX index, respiratory failure, COVID-19.

Introduction

Since the beginning of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, several progresses have been made in preventing and managing the most severe forms of the disease. The RECOVERY trial provided evidence that treatment with dexamethasone reduces 28-day mortality in patients with Covid-19 who are receiving respiratory support [1]. The extensive vaccination campaigns and the introduction of early therapies as well as the reorganization of health facilities contributed in reducing the disease burden and its pressure on hospitals and intensive care units (ICUs) [2]. However, despite these remarkable advances, the most frequent severe manifestation of COVID-19 remains interstitial pneumonia leading to acute hypoxic respiratory failure (AHRF) in up to 20% of the cases [3,4]. The optimal management and site of care of AHRF patients with COVID-19 still remain matter of debate. On the one hand, it is necessary to avoid ICUs overload. On the other hand, in patients who do not benefit from conventional oxygen therapy (COT) or non-invasive respiratory support strategies (*i.e.,* high-flow nasal cannula HFNC, Continous Positive Airway Pressure CPAP, Non-invasive Ventilation NIV), it is crucial not to delay endotracheal intubation (ETI) [5,6].

Therefore, predictors of outcome (*i.e.,* failure of non-invasive respiratory support) are fundamental in distinguishing these patients to optimize their treatment and site of care. In this regard, the HACOR score (heart rate, acidosis, state of consciousness, oxygenation, and respiratory rate) and the ROX index (Respiratory rate– OXygenation) have been introduced before COVID-19 pandemic to predict failure of non-invasive support strategies in AHRF, with HACOR specifically focusing on the first hour of treatment [5]. Although the ROX index, the ratio of peripheral oxygen saturation (SpO_2) and a fraction of inspired oxygen (FIO_2) to Respiratory Rate (RR), was initially validated to predict failure of HFNC in patients with severe pneumonia (*i.e.* score < 3.85 within 12 hours) [7], some studies also validated its usefulness in patients with COVID-19 pneumonia [8].

However, it should be considered that due to the pathophysiological peculiarities of respiratory failure in COVID-19, it is important to acquire prognostic information not only related to the first hours of admission, but also during the first days of hospitalization and during non-invasive respiratory support trials [9]. The purpose of this investigation was therefore to evaluate the predictive role of ROX index in identifying treatment failure (*i.e.,* ETI or death) of patients hospitalized because of COVID-19 pneumonia using data of the overall hospitalization.

Materials and Methods

This multicentric, prospective, observational study was conducted in 8 university-affiliated hospitals in Italy from August 2020 to August 2021. This study was approved by the Ethics

Committee of the principal site in Bergamo, Italy (Comitato Etico di Bergamo, Italy. N°308/20) and by the respective Ethics Committees of the participating centres (as listed in Supplementary material). Informed consent was obtained from all participants and the study was conducted in compliance with the Declaration of Helsinki (2013). For critically ill patients or those unable to sign, verbal consent was given for routine clinical parameter collection. The present analysis included patients with confirmed SARS-CoV-2 infection, determined by a positive result on RT-PCR of oro- and nasopharyngeal swabs at the initial test and evidence of acute respiratory failure. At the time of admission to the respiratory unit, demographic data, medical history, respiratory parameters (*i.e.,* type of respiratory support, FIO_2, SpO_2, respiratory rate RR), heart rate (HR), systemic arterial blood pressure and body temperature were collected. Radiologic assessments and all laboratory tests were performed according to local clinical practice and based on clinical needs. Respiratory parameters were evaluated at least once a day, when feasible two measurements were taken, one in the morning and one in the evening. Based on these data, the ROX index was calculated using the formula $(SpO_2/FIO_2)/RR$ [7]; when two measurements were available, ROX index was expressad as mean value. Data collection was performed until the main outcome was reached (*i.e.,* ETI or death) or the patient was discharged.

Statistical analysis

We used descriptive statistics to summarize patients characteristics. Continuous variables were expressed as medians and interquartile ranges (IQRs) and categorical ones as counts and percentages. Patients characteristics were stratified for composite outcome (yes/no) and differences between groups were tested using the Mann-Whitney test for continuous variables and the chi-square test (or Fisher's exact test when appropriate) for categorical variables. We performed a mixed model for repeated measures (random intercept and random slope) to evaluate the ROX index trend over time and across strata of composite outcome. Receiver Operator Characteristic (ROC) curves of ROX index along with Areas Under the Curve (AUC) and corresponding 95% Confidence Intervals (CIs) were evaluated to predict the need of ETI or death during the first week of hospitalization. However, the optimal ROX index to discriminate the composite outcome was determined considering in particular the first three days of hospitalization, due to the clinical relevance of this time interval for stabilization and trial of non-invasive respiratory support [10,11]. The predictive ability of the difference between ROX index of day 3 and day 1 (Δ ROX) and of the slope of ROX index over the first three days (obtained through a linear regression model, β ROX) was evaluated by analyzing the ROC curves and AUC, as well. To identify the best cut-off for ROX index we used the ROC curves, Liu method.

We computed time to event as the time, expressed in days, between the date of hospitalization and the date of composite outcome and we censored the time for patients free of event at the end of follow-up period. Kaplan Meier (KM) curves were stratified using the ROX index at day 1, 2 and 3; the cut-off for strata was computed on the highest AUC obtained and was used for stratifying ROX index both at day 1, and at day 2, and also at day 3. Differences in KM curves between strata of ROX index were tested using the log-rank test. Using Cox proportional hazards models, we estimated the hazard ratios (HRs) of composite outcome and the corresponding 95% CIs for ROX index, separately for day 1, 2 and 3.
For all tested hypotheses, two-sided p-values of 0.05 or less were considered significant. Statistical analysis was performed using STATA Software, release 16.1 (StataCorp LP, College Station TX, USA) and was carried out at the biostatistical laboratory of the Foundation for Research (FROM) at Papa Giovanni XXIII Hospital in Bergamo.

Results

A total of 227 patients were evaluated. Their median [IQR] age was 63 [53-74] years, 69.2% were male. The baseline characteristics are presented in Table 1. The population was generally overweight, with a median BMI of 27.7 kg/m^2; 62.5% had never been smokers, while 7.0% and 30.5% was active and former smokers, respectively. The main comorbidities were cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes mellitus and chronic respiratory diseases (see *Supplementary Table 1* for details). At hospital admission, arterial blood gas analysis (ABG) showed a median [IQR] PaO_2/FIO_2 ratio of 248 [170-295].

Features of patients according to main outcome

Nearly one third of the population either required intubation or died during hospitalization (N=67, 29.5%). As shown in Table 1, compared to patients who were discharged alive, patients who either died or required intubation were older (median age 70 vs 61 years, p<0.001), were more frequently smokers or former smokers (8.5% vs 6.4% and 42.4% vs 25.5%, p=0.039) and had a higher burden of cardiovascular disease (74.6% vs 46.3%, p<0.001).
Moreover, they had a lower PaO_2/FIO_2 ratio at presentation (median 229 vs 254, p=0.014). There were no differences regarding gender, BMI or other comorbidities (Table 1).
Trend of the ROX index during the first week of hospitalization, stratified by outcome, is reported in Figure 1. As shown, ROX index was higher already at presentation in those who survived (9.76 [6.94 – 13.79] *vs* 7.19 [6.13 – 9.61], p<0.001). ROX index increased over time for no-ETI and alive patients and, on the opposite, it is stable or slightly decreasing in

patients who died or required ETI, indicating a different effect of ROX index time trend across the composite outcome categories (p=0.0004).

Predictive role of ROX index and best cut-off

Figure 2 shows ROC curves of a) ROX index over the first three days of hospitalization, b) of Δ ROX and c) of β ROX. ROX index of day 3 had the best predictive ability, showing the highest AUC (0.79, 95% CI 0.72-0.85). Supplemental analyses were performed considering ROC curves of ROX indexes over the first week, confirming the improvement in predictive capacity of ROX index from the third day (see *Supplementary Figure 1*).

The best cut-off of ROX index at day 3 was 8.53 (sensitivity 75%; specificity 68%). The ROX index cut-off of 8.53, was used to investigate the ETI free survival of study population. Kaplan-Meier curves show that patients with ROX index (both at day 1, and at day 2 and also at day 3) lower or equal than 8.53 have a higher risk of treatment failure (Figure 3; HR for ROX index at day 3 8.53 was 3.6, 95% CI 2.10-6.13; HR for ROX index at day 2 8.53 was 2.0, 95% CI 1.23-3.34; HR for ROX index at day 1 8.53 was 2.5, 95% CI 1.46-4.16).

Discussion and Conclusions

The main results from this study can be summarized as follows: a) The median value of ROX index is lower in COVID-19 subjects who fail treatment, already at the time of hospital admission (7.19 *vs* 9.76); b) a ROX index 8.53 is a good predictive value of treatment failure at any time; c) Considering the timing of ROX index assessment, evaluation on day 3 since hospitalization is the best predictor of treatment failure; d) Single assessment of ROX index on day 3 is more predictive than its variability over time.

Our study population is comparable to larger cohorts of patients hospitalized due to COVID-19 pneumonia, in terms of anthropometric characteristics and outcomes (*i.e.,* ETI or death) [12,13]. The main contribution of this study is given by the evaluation of the ROX index over a long period of time (*i.e.,* one week), while previous studies are generally focused on the first hours of treatment [14].

In a particular scenario, such as that of the pandemic, evaluation over a longer interval can offer advantages and better reflect what is daily clinical practice. In fact, except in conditions of instability, only a minority of COVID-19 patients are intubated in the first 24 hours [15], while most patients undergo clinical stability and possibly non-invasive respiratory support escalation during the first 48-72 hours [16,17]. Therefore, exploring the predictive role of ROX at this stage can be useful in understanding how to prioritize intensification of patients at risk of treatment failure.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Roca *et al.* [7] described ROX index to predict the need for invasive ventilation among patients with pneumonia and acute respiratory failure treated with HFNC, showing that a ROX index 4.88 measured in the very first hours after HFNC therapy, indicated a lower risk for treatment failure, while a ROX index 3.85 at 12 h was predictor of HFNC failure.

This threshold was then used by Myers et al. [8] to validate ROX in a cohort of inpatients with COVID-19 related respiratory failure treated with HFNC. Using a ROX threshold of 3.85, they found a positive predictive value of 59.4% (need for invasive mechanical ventilation).

However, when investigating ROX thresholds in the context of COVID-19, the results seem to be quite heterogeneous and to partly differ from what has been described by Roca et al.

During the first pandemic wave, Zaboli *et al.* [18] compared the ROX value obtained at triage with the medical diagnosis of ARDS and intubation at 72 h. Those who developed ARDS or underwent intubation had a lower average median ROX index (value of 13.1 and 15.3, respectively) compared to those who did not develop ARDS or did not require intubation (value of 25.2 and 22.2, respectively).

Similarly, Suliman *et al.* [10] validated the ROX index on day 1 (cutoff value 25.26), for predicting the risk of intubation in COVID-19 patients using the HFNC. Moreover, the ROX index was investigated as a prognostic indicator among COVID-19 patients receiving CPAP, showing that values > 6.32 pre-CPAP and > 7.77 after 24 h of CPAP therapy were indicative of successful weaning in > 80% of cases [19].

In accordance with our results, ROX thresholds in COVID-19 are generally higher than those of Roca *et al.* [7]. The reason behind this diversity has not been fully understood yet. However, it is possible that the heterogeneity of the study populations, which often include moderate cases, may have contributed to raising the threshold. Furthermore, relatively preserved pulmonary compliance is described during the early stages of the disease [20]. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that this account for a lower respiratory rate, also observed in so-called "silent hypoxia" cases, which would justify a higher ROX index [21]. Another confounding factor can be the role of shunt or blunted hypoxic pulmonary vasoconstriction in COVID-19. The administration of high FiO_2 in case of pulmonary shunt, which is a condition of FIO_2 insensitiveness, can lead to an artifactual alteration of the respiratory exchange indices [22].

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to evaluate the ROX index over such a large time interval (*i.e.,* one week). The most interesting result, balancing the clinical needs with the utility of a prognostic index, was the evaluation on the third day. Indeed, the patient has generally been stabilized and has started trials of non-invasive respiratory support during

the first 72 hours of hospitalization, at this point it is essential to have a prognostic tool to help us decide how to proceed. We identified a ROX index of 8.53 on day 3 (sensitivity 75%; specificity 68%) as the best cut-off for predicting failure of noninvasive respiratory support. Our cut-off limit is comparable to the threshold (ROX index = 6.64 at 24h) identified by Colaianni-Alfonso *et al*. in a recent study that evaluated the outcome of COVID-19 patients treated with CPAP [23], and also with the threshold (ROX index = 6.86 at 24h) found by Nova *et al*. when investigating the likelihood of NIV success in COVID-19 patients [24].

As already anticipated, studies that evaluate the ROX after the first 24 hours are not frequent. However, the results of Suliman *et al.* [10] during the first three days of hospitalization, demonstrate an increasing predictive capacity of ROX over time (ROX 11.71 on day 3; 90% of sensitivity and 100% of specificity, AUC 0.967, p-value 0.001). Regarding ROX variation over time (*i.e.,* Δ ROX), the evidence is even more limited. A recent study by Abroug *et al.* [25], showed that difference between ROX at 12 h and at baseline (ICU admission), increased significantly more in the HFNC success group compared to the group failing this therapy (medians 2.7 *vs* 0.47, respectively), finding a Δ ROX cutoff 1.8 as the best index to predict HFNC failure (sensitivity 0.89 and specificity 0.61). We investigated the ROX variation over a wider period (Δ ROX $_{3-1}$) and the slope of the first three ROX values (linear regression, β), however predictive capabilities were not superior to those of ROX on day 3 (AUC ROX_{3-1} 0.6079 and β 0.6010 *vs* ROX.3 0.7862). Therefore, the threshold of 8.53 on the third day can be interpreted as a more powerful prognostic index than the clinical trend. In other words, a patient who is improving but does not reach the expected cut-off on the third day, deserves greater clinical attention.

Our study has some limitations. Firstly, the study population was heterogeneous and had different degrees of respiratory insufficiency managed with different respiratory supports. However, we purposely enrolled a population that was representative of hospital management outside the ICU area. The cut-offs that have been found, are therefore useful in evaluating a patient that undergoes clinical stabilization and possibly respiratory support escalation for a few days, which is the most common scenario in daily clinical practice. Secondly, studies on ROX index generally evaluate multiple measurements of the index over the first 24 hours from the start of a treatment, while in our study we had one measure per day for the first week of hospitalization. This choice was made to investigate the predictive capacity of ROX when measured like other vital parameters in a non-intensive setting. Finally, the multicenter nature of the study may have led to differences in the intensification criteria or respiratory management of patients. However, this study considered the second

and the third pandemic peak in Italy, when the treatment and respiratory support protocols were more homogeneous than in the first pandemic peak. Furthermore, the simplicity of calculation of the ROX index can hardly lead to errors in the data collection.

In conclusion, the ROX index has shown to be a practical prognostic tool in COVID-19. A single assessment of ROX index on day 3 since hospitalization is more informative than its variability over time and a value ≤ 8.53 is predictive of failure of non-invasive respiratory support. This finding is useful in identifying patients at risk for unfavorable outcomes and guiding the decision-making process.

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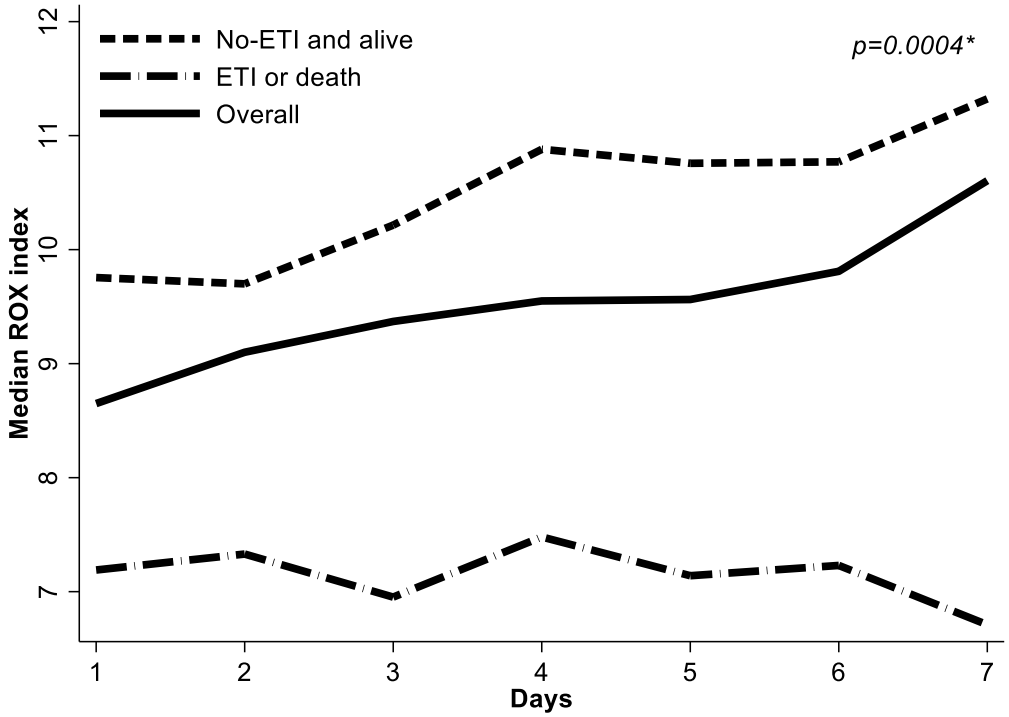
Online supplementary material
Supplementary Table 1. Detailed pneumological and cardiologic diseases according to the outcome combined.
Supplementary Figure 1. Receiver operator characteristic curves of respiratory rate-oxygenation index at day 1 to 7 for outcome endotracheal intubation and death combined.

Table 1. Baseline characteristics of 227 patients according to the outcome.

	Total N=227	ETI or Death		*p*-value
		No N=160	Yes N=67	
Age, *median [IQR]*	63 [53-74]	61 [52-71]	70 [62-80]	**<0.001**
50, *N (%)*	44 (20)	37 (24)	7 (11)	**0.001**
51-60, *N (%)*	51 (22)	42 (26)	9 (13)	
61-70, *N (%)*	58 (25)	40 (25)	18 (27)	
>70, *N (%)*	74 (32)	41 (25)	33 (49)	
Sex, *N (%)*				
Men	157 (69)	109 (68)	48 (72)	0.600
Women	70 (31)	51 (32)	19 (28)	
BMI, *median [IQR]*	28 [25-31]	28 [25-31]	28 [25-32]	0.740
<20.0, *N (%)*	2 (1)	2 (1)	0 (0)	
20.0-24.9, *N (%)*	35 (15)	24 (15)	11 (16)	
25.0-29.9, *N (%)*	102 (45)	81 (51)	21 (31)	
30.0, *N (%)*	88 (39)	53 (33)	35 (52)	
Smoke, *N (%)*				**0.039**
No	125 (63)	96 (68)	29 (49)	
Yes	14 (7)	9 (6)	5 (9)	
Ex	61 (31)	36 (26)	25 (42)	
Immunocompromission, *N (%)*	12 (5)	6 (4)	6 (9)	0.110
Nefropathies, *N (%)*	12 (5)	6 (4)	6 (9)	0.110
Pulmonary diseases°, *N (%)*	28 (12)	16 (10)	12 (18)	0.098
Liver diseases, *N (%)*	10 (4)	6 (4)	4 (6)	0.490
Cardiovascular diseases#, *N (%)*	124 (55)	74 (46)	50 (75)	**<0.001**
Solid active neoplasia, *N (%)*	9 (4)	5 (3)	4 (6)	0.460
Diabetes, *N (%)*	38 (17)	23 (14)	15 (22)	0.140
Neurological disease, *N (%)*	20 (9)	11 (7)	9 (13)	0.120
Hematological disease, *N (%)*	11 (5)	5 (3)	6 (9)	0.062
Patologia reumatologica, *N (%)*	9 (4)	6 (4)	3 (5)	0.730
PaO_2/FIO_2 (at first EGA), *median [IQR]*	248 [170-295]	254 [189-297]	229 [120-286]	**0.014**
ROX day 1, *median [IQR]*	8.65 [6.46-12.91]	9.76 [6.94-13.79]	7.19 [6.13-9.61]	**<0.001**
ROX day 2, *median [IQR]*	9.10 [6.89-12.59]	9.70 [7.53-14.05]	7.33 [5.48-9.66]	**<0.001**
ROX day 3, *median [IQR]*	9.37 [6.94-12.43]	10.22 [8.00-13.11]	6.95 [5.82-8.75]	**<0.001**

°includes COPD, asthma, interstitial lung diseases, bronchiectases; #includes arterial hypertension, dyslipidemia, cardiovascular diseases, (valvular diseases, hypertensive or ischemic cardiomyopathy, atrial fibrillation, arterial vasculopathy).



**p for interaction between time and outcome (ETI and death combined) obtained from a mixed model – random intercept and random slope*

Median ROX [IQR]	Days						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Overall							
	8.65 [6.46-12.91]	9.10 [6.89-12.59]	9.37 [6.94-12.43]	9.55 [7.54-13.47]	9.56 [7.38-13.53]	9.81 [7.78-14.18]	10.61 [7.44-14.28]
ETI or deaths							
	7.19 [6.13- 9.61]	7.33 [5.48-9.66]	6.95 [5.82-8.75]	7.48 [5.61-8.57]	7.14 [5.52-8.84]	7.23 [5.38-8.57]	6.71 [5.06-8.74]
No-ETI and alive							
	9.76 [6.94-13.79]	9.70 [7.53-14.05]	10.22 [8.0-13.11]	10.88 [8.42-14.07]	10.76 [8.19-15.02]	10.77 [8.49-15.31]	11.32 [8.47-14.97]

Figure 1. Daily median ROX index trend, overall and stratified by outcome (ETI and death combined).

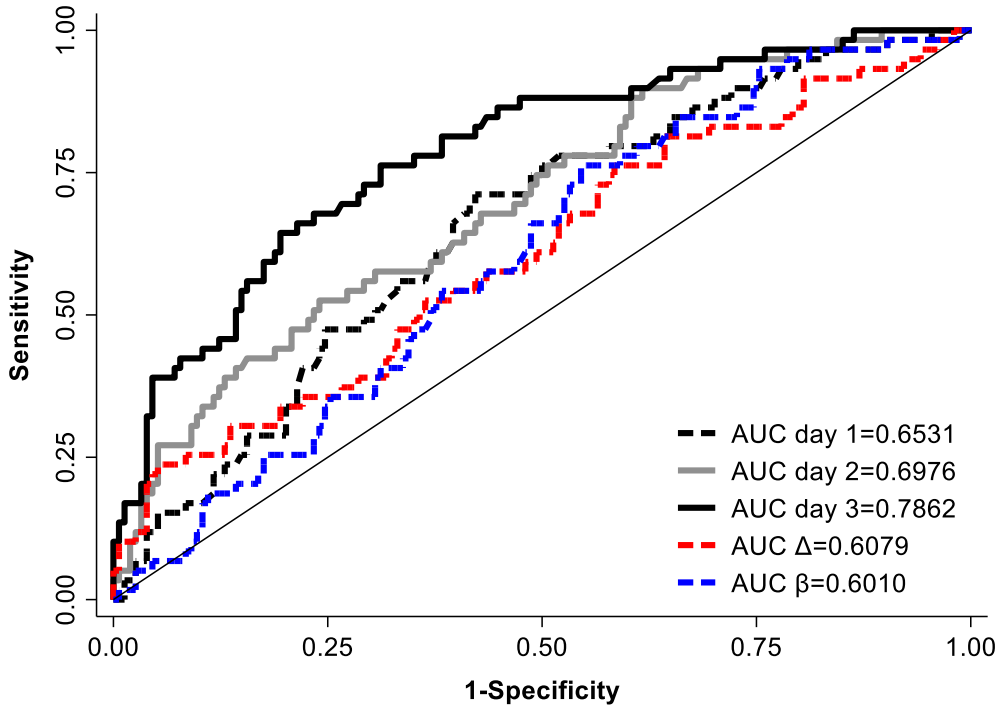


Figure 2. ROC curves of ROX index at day 1, 2 and 3, of Δ between ROX index at day 1 and ROX index at day 3 and of regression coefficient β of ROX index at day 1 to 3 for outcome ETI and death combined.

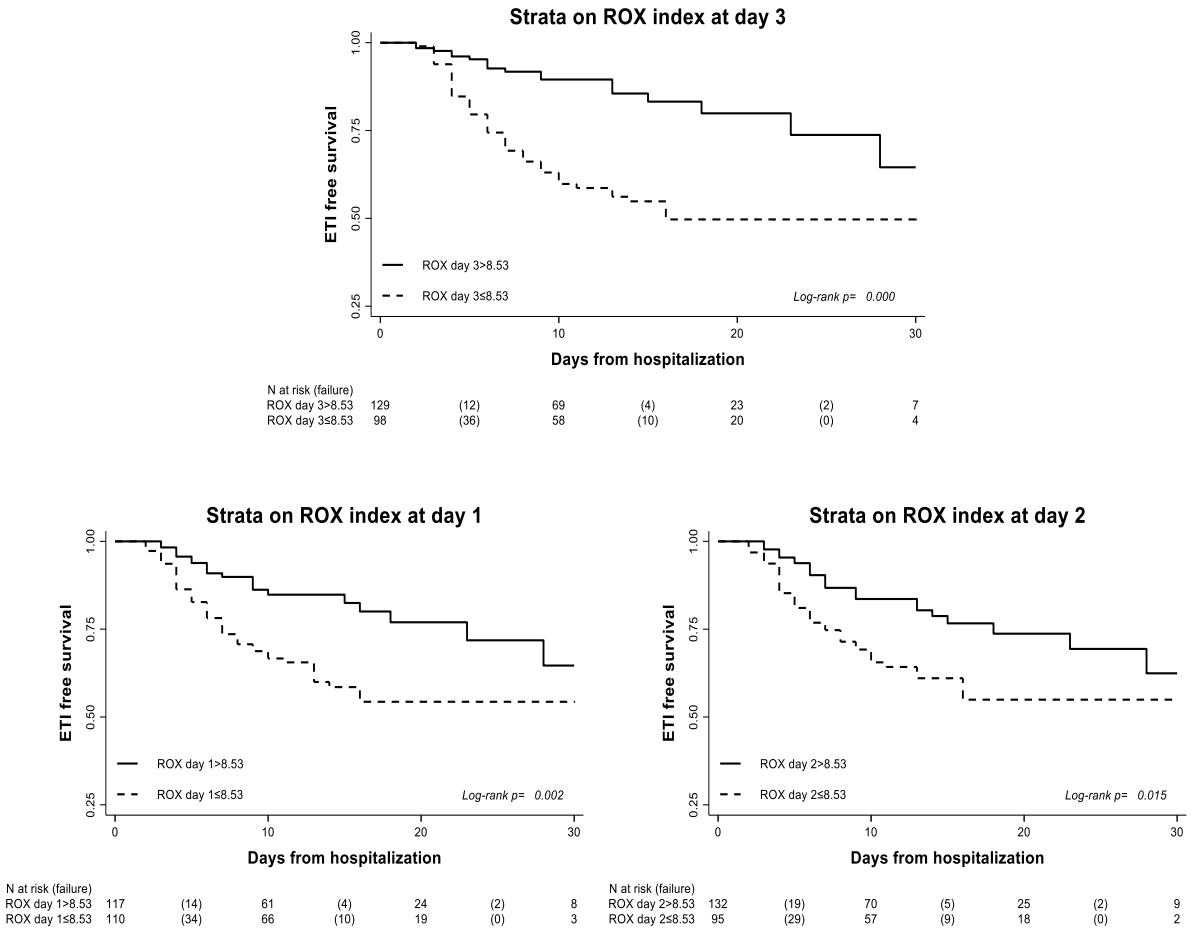


Figure 3. Kaplan-Meier curves stratified by ROX index (cut-off 8.53) at day 1, 2, and 3. The cut-off was computed as the best one on ROX index at day 3.

ABBREVIATIONS

AHRF: acute hypoxemic respiratory failure
AUC: area under the curve
BMI: body mass index
COT: conventional oxygen therapy
CPAP: continuous positive airway pressure
ETI: endotracheal intubation
FiO_2: fraction of inspired oxygen
HFNC: high-flow nasal cannula
HR: heart rate
HRs: hazard ratios
ICU: intensive care unit
IQR: interquartile range
KM: Kaplan-Meier
NIV: non-invasive ventilation
PaO_2: arterial partial pressure of oxygen
ROC: receiver operator characteristic
ROX: Respiratory rate – Oxygenation index
RR: respiratory rate
RT-PCR: real time polymerase chain reaction
SpO_2: peripheral oxygen saturation