EFFECTS OF NEWLY DEVELOPED COMPACT ROBOT-AIDED UPPER EXTREMITY TRAINING SYSTEMS (NEURO-X®) IN PATIENTS WITH STROKE: A PILOT STUDY

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Objective: Robot-assisted rehabilitation therapy of the upper extremity after stroke has been studied widely; however, robotic devices remain expensive and bulky. The aim of this study was to evaluate the effects of a newly developed, compact upper extremity training system (Neuro-X®) in patients with chronic stroke.

Design: Pilot study.

Subjects: Fifteen patients with hemiplegia.

Methods: Chronic patients with stroke underwent upper extremity training using a newly developed upper extremity training system (Neuro-X®; Apsun Inc., Seoul, Korea). Patients were evaluated using the Fugl-Meyer Assessment (FMA), Hand Function Test (HFT), Modified Ashworth Scale (MAS), and Korean Mini-Mental Status Evaluation (K-MMSE). The assessment started with “pre 1 evaluation” (A1), followed by repeated “pre 2 evaluation” (A2) after 6 weeks without receiving any treatment, in order to generate repeated baseline data. After the A2 evaluation, upper extremity training was performed for 6 weeks. Post-training evaluation (B) was performed after treatment. Obtained data (A1–A2–B) were compared.

Results: During the non-intervention phase (A1 to A2), no significant changes were found in the aforementioned evaluations. However, in the intervention phase (A2 to B), results of the FMA and HFT, and K-MMSE scores, except the MAS score, increased significantly (p < 0.05).

Conclusion: The Neuro-X® training system improves functioning of the upper extremity and cognition in patients with stroke after 6 weeks of training.

Key words: robotics; rehabilitation; stroke; upper extremity.

Accepted April 25, 2018; Epub ahead of print Jun 26, 2018


Persistent impairment of upper extremity motor functioning is common after stroke and involves the motor area of the brain. Although weakness of the upper extremity might not be severe, the paretic arm in patients with hemiplegia could limit activities of daily living and contribute to stroke-related disability (1–4). In general, reduced upper extremity functioning has been reported even in stroke survivors who have made a good recovery.

Various attempts have been made to improve motor functioning of the affected upper extremity in patients with hemiplegia. Repetitive movement training, based on the neuroplasticity of the affected side of the brain after stroke, has been reported to contribute to functional recovery of hemiplegia. In this context, high-intensity repetitive training for functional recovery of the upper extremity has been used in rehabilitation (4–7). Among the devices and methods for high-intensity repetitive training of the affected extremity, robotic systems have been found effective for improving motor recovery of patients with stroke over recent decades (8–11). In addition, a robotic system for upper extremity rehabilitation can safely improve upper extremity functioning in patients with subacute and chronic stroke (12, 13). Robot-assisted upper extremity training has been reported to be an effective treatment based on brain neuroplasticity studies, and the clinical application of robotic-aided therapy has been increasing (8, 14–16).

However, these robotic devices are still expensive and are too bulky to be used in a therapy room. The newly developed, compact Neuro-X® system (Apsun Inc., Seoul, Korea) was designed to be small (width × depth × height 580 × 1,100 × 1,250 mm, weight 75 kg), inexpensive (USD 24,000), and easy to move. The system allows various muscle strength
measurements and different therapeutic game modes. The aim of this study was to evaluate the effects of rehabilitation treatment after 6 weeks of upper extremity training in patients with hemiplegia caused by stroke using this newly developed, compact robot device (Neuro-X®).

**METHODS**

**Subjects**

The present study included chronic stroke patients with hemiplegia, who were followed up as outpatients at the Department of Rehabilitation Medicine of Chonbuk University Hospital between March 2014 and November 2015.

The inclusion criteria were: (i) first stroke caused by cerebral haemorrhage or infarction, occurring more than 6 months before study inclusion; (ii) age between 20 and 85 years; (iii) Fugl-Meyer upper motor scores (FMA-UE) over 18; and (iv) voluntary agreement and provision of signed consent form. Exclusion criteria were: (i) patients with severe cognitive impairment or aphasia who could not follow the examiner’s instructions and with Korean Mini-Mental Status Evaluation (K-MMSE) scores below 18; (ii) current severe medical diseases; and (iii) patients deemed unsuitable by the examiner for participation in the clinical study for other reasons.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from our institutional review board (IRB) (IRB number 2013-08-020).

**Procedure**

This study had an exploratory design with a baseline phase (A1), intervention phase (A2), and post-test phase (B). The study began with the pre-1 evaluation (A1) followed by the pre-2 evaluation (A2) (after 6 weeks with no treatment), which repeated the pre-1 evaluation to generate the repeated baseline data. After these 2 pre-evaluations, subjects performed upper extremity training with the Neuro-X® for 6 weeks. Subsequently, post-training evaluation was performed immediately after treatment (B). Data obtained during each evaluation (A1–A2–B) were compared.

During the robot-assisted upper extremity rehabilitation treatment with the newly developed robot-aided upper extremity training system (Neuro-X®) (Fig. 1A), subjects were seated comfortably in a chair in front of the robot. The hemiplegic upper extremity was attached to an arm support located at the end of the device.
active-assisted games, which could be performed by patients, and provided visual feedback to help goal-oriented tasks that were performed according to the goal or target provided to the patient during training. The method of muscle strength measurement was adjusted for each treatment mode at the beginning of treatment.

Various ROMs of the robotic arm were conveyed as a single signal through a robot’s sensor, which allowed sensing of the patient’s movements and measurement of patient’s strength. Therefore, subjects’ motor threshold values were assessed through isometric and isokinetic measurements in the initial stage of the robot program, and movements were enabled by the patient’s remaining strength. After assessing the movements obtained at the early stage of each treatment session to determine proper exercise intensity, threshold values of muscle strength were entered in a database. The game could be played only when the measured strength was higher than the previous setting threshold.

**Measures**

Patients were evaluated using the Fugl-Meyer Assessment (FMA), Manual Muscle Test, Hand Function Tests (HFTs), Modified Ashworth Scale (MAS), and Mini-Mental State Evaluation (MMSE). These tests were first conducted during the A1 phase, and all evaluations were subsequently repeated during the B phase. Post-training evaluations (A3) were performed after 6 weeks of upper extremity training.

The FMA is a widely used scale to assess motor impairment in patients with stroke. The FMA-UE was used to evaluate the function of the affected upper extremity (17, 18). According to previous studies on robotic rehabilitation, this scale is commonly used to assess motor improvement. The scale consists of 62 items. Among the 62 items, the FMA-UE shoulder/elbow and coordination (SEC) subsection (FM-SEC = 42/66), wrist/hand (WH) subsection (FM-WH = 24/66), and total score (FMA-UE = 66) were used in this study because the Neuro-X® could be used to treat only the upper extremity (19, 20).

HFTs included the Grip Strength Test, Box and Block Test, and 9-Hole Peg Test (NHPT). These tests were used to assess the strength and dexterity of the affected hand (21). For grip strength, the hand dynamometer (JAMAR®, Chicago, IL, USA) was used to measure the maximum grip power. The Box and Block Test was used to assess gross manual dexterity by counting the number of blocks moved from one box to the other for 1 min. The NHPT was used to assess fine manual dexterity by measuring the time it took each patient to place 9 pegs one at a time into 9 holes and then to remove them one at a time.

The MAS (range 0–4) were used to assess spasticity of the affected extremity (22).

The neurocognitive function test used in the present study was the K-MMSE (23).

**Statistical analysis**

Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 24.0 statistical software (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). For data obtained in each phase (A1, A2, B), the values of the examinations are presented as mean values and standard deviations (SD), and ordinary scales are described as medians and interquartile ranges (IQR). Comparisons between the differences in the non-intervention phase (A1 to A2) and differences in the intervention phase (A2 to B) were computed and statistically compared using the paired t-test for normally distributed variables (Box and Block Test, and MAS), whereas the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used for other tests that showed non-normally distributed variables. The p-value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

**RESULTS**

Demographic data

During the study period, 20 hemiplegic patients with stroke visited our department. Of these, 5 were excluded from the study because they did not satisfy the enrollment criteria, and 15 patients were consecutively enrolled in the study. One patient dropped out because of personal reasons. Fourteen patients completed the training programme with the Neuro-X® (11 men and 3 women, mean age 57.64 years (SD 2.21)). Six patients had right hemiplegia and 8 had left hemiplegia. The cause of the condition was ischaemic stroke in 11 patients and haemorrhagic stroke in 3 patients. The mean duration of illness was 44.07 months (SD 4.25).

Effects of robot-assisted upper extremity rehabilitation treatment

No major or minor adverse effects were found during the training programme. During the non-intervention phase (A1 to A2), no significant changes were noted in the scores of hand function, FMA, MAS, and K-MMSE (p > 0.05, Tables I and II). However, after the training, the mean Hand Grip Strength, Box and Block Test, and NHPT scores significantly improved from 6.14 (SD 6.63) to 7.29 (SD 7.75) (p = 0.017), from 10.50 (SD 6.63) to 10.80 (SD 7.75) (p = 0.001), and from 14.71 (SD 21.08) to 12.71 (SD 18.45) (p = 0.001), respectively. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 24.0 statistical software (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). For data obtained in each phase (A1, A2, B), the values of the examinations are presented as mean values and standard deviations (SD), and ordinary scales are described as medians and interquartile ranges (IQR). Comparisons between the differences in the non-intervention phase (A1 to A2) and differences in the intervention phase (A2 to B) were computed and statistically compared using the paired t-test for normally distributed variables (Box and Block Test, and MAS), whereas the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used for other tests that showed non-normally distributed variables. The p-value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

### Table I. Comparison of affected upper extremity hand function test scores after training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>A1 Mean (SD)</th>
<th>A2 Mean (SD)</th>
<th>B Mean (SD)</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hand grip, kg</td>
<td>6.21 (6.77)</td>
<td>6.14 (6.63)</td>
<td>6.14 (6.63)</td>
<td>0.317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box and block</td>
<td>10.71 (9.32)</td>
<td>10.50 (9.39)</td>
<td>10.50 (9.39)</td>
<td>0.189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-hole peg test</td>
<td>14.71 (21.08)</td>
<td>14.50 (20.92)</td>
<td>14.50 (20.92)</td>
<td>0.043*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < 0.05.

A1: baseline; A2: 6 weeks later without training from A1; B: 6 weeks later with training from A2. SD: standard deviation.

### Table II. Comparison of affected upper extremity function test scores, spasticity and cognitive function after training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>A1 Mean (SD)</th>
<th>A2 Mean (SD)</th>
<th>B Mean (SD)</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FMA-SEC</td>
<td>30.79 (12.95)</td>
<td>30.71 (12.96)</td>
<td>30.71 (12.96)</td>
<td>0.336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FMA-UE</td>
<td>23.36 (6.71)</td>
<td>23.36 (6.71)</td>
<td>23.36 (6.71)</td>
<td>0.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FMA-WH</td>
<td>7.57 (7.09)</td>
<td>7.50 (7.11)</td>
<td>7.50 (7.11)</td>
<td>0.941*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-MMSE</td>
<td>27.50 (2.44)</td>
<td>27.36 (2.76)</td>
<td>27.36 (2.76)</td>
<td>2.00 (2.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAS</td>
<td>2.07 (0.92)</td>
<td>2.07 (0.92)</td>
<td>2.07 (0.92)</td>
<td>2.00 (0.88)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < 0.05.

A1: baseline; A2: 6 weeks later without training from A1; B: 6 weeks later with training from A2; FMA: Fugl-Meyer Assessment; FMA-SEC: Fugl-Meyer assessment – shoulder, elbow and coordination; K-MMSE: Korean Mini Mental Status Evaluation; MAS: Modified Ashworth Scale; SD: standard deviation.
DISCUSSION

This pilot study evaluated the movements that could be performed by residual upper extremity muscle strength in patients with hemiplegia caused by stroke, and revealed that intensive treatment using the newly developed robot-assisted upper extremity training system Neuro-X® for 6 weeks could improve the function of the patient’s affected upper extremity and cognitive function.

Various extremity rehabilitation treatments are available for patients with stroke, such as conventional rehabilitation therapy, constraint-induced movement therapy (CIMT), functional electrical stimulation, orthoses, and robot therapy (15). CIMT has a limitation of being only applicable to patients who have a certain degree of voluntary movement in the affected upper extremity (24). Moreover, it is difficult for a therapist to treat numerous patients or help them exercise with consistent intensity daily using previous conventional rehabilitation therapy, since one therapist can treat only one patient at a time in Korea and the work intensity of the therapist is high. Furthermore, it is difficult to obtain quantitative physiological information of patients during the exercise (25). As an alternative to overcome the limitations of previously mentioned treatments provided to patients with stroke, the upper extremity rehabilitation treatments using robots have been introduced, and their positive effects have been reported recently (15, 16). However, these robotic devices are still expensive and take up too much space in the therapy room.

This study evaluated the effect of rehabilitation treatment using the newly developed, compact upper extremity training system Neuro-X® in patients with chronic stroke. In this context, the characteristics of the Neuro-X® training system used in this study can be summarized as follows. First, the Neuro-X® is inexpensive (USD 24,000), small in size (width × depth × height 580 × 1,100 × 1,250 mm, weight 75 kg), and easy to move. Therefore, it will increase the clinical use of robotic-aided upper extremity rehabilitation, and make it more convenient and usable for patients. Secondly, patient’s motor threshold values were assessed through isometric and isokinetic measurements before the beginning of the exercise. After assessing threshold values, the training could be conducted only when the muscle strength exceeded the previous threshold. Furthermore, the threshold values gradually increased according to the individual’s characteristics and levels of improvement; therefore, the intensity of training could be naturally altered. These force feedbacks with a constant intensity for movements of the affected arm can be consistently provided during the training. Thirdly, the Neuro-X® has various treatment modes. The task-specific mode is training for moving the arm exactly on the target or giving the direction of the force. The CPM mode is a passive exercise mode that automatically moves within a certain range if the desired angle or speed is set. When the patient’s strength is measured during exercise, it is possible to switch to APM or AAM mode. The APM mode is a passive exercise mode in which the handle is moved automatically by the force of the robot. When the patient’s movement is detected, the mode is switched to active. When the patient’s movement is lost, the mode is switched to the passive exercise mode. The AAM mode does not provide assistance with the movement of the arm if the patient does not intend to move, but if the patient is willing to move, it detects it and begins movement.

Because Neuro-X® has many exercise modes it can be widely used in various patients. Finally, visual games in robotic devices replaced the exercises that could be performed and had positive effects because they stimulated patient’s internal competitive spirit, and improved treatment compliance and satisfaction. The game programs improved interest and pleasure during treatment, thereby facilitating motor learning and recovery (15, 26–28). In our study, the treatment response of the patients was similar to the results of previous studies.

The functional evaluations after Neuro-X®-aided upper extremity training in this study showed improvement as in previous studies using upper extremity rehabilitation robots in patients with stroke (29–31). The functional recovery mechanism of the upper extremity induced by the Neuro-X® used in this study is likely to be associated with motor learning, motor adaptation, and compensation among various recovery mechanisms of the brain (32, 33). In general, recovery of the brain function is known to be achieved by repeated exercise training with high intensity. Therefore, the recovery mechanism after brain damage can be viewed as a process induced by exercise training. Previous
Robot-aided upper extremity training for stroke patients


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported by a grant of the Korea Health Technology R&D Project through the Korea Health Industry Development Institute (KHIDI), funded by the Ministry of Health & Welfare, Republic of Korea (grant number: HI15C1529).

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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