

Accuracy of postoperative recall by degenerative cervical myelopathy patients using the modified Japanese Orthopaedic Association scale

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Article information:

Received: October 7, 2022

Revised: November 1, 2022

Accepted: November 3, 2022

Abstract

Background and aim: The modified Japanese Orthopaedic Association (mJOA) scale is one of the primary measures of neurological function used on patients with degenerative cervical myelopathy (DCM). Contrary to some reports, the mJOA is not based on patient-reported outcomes (PROs) as it is an assessment conducted by physicians, allied health professionals, or trained staff. To date, the accuracy of postoperative recall by DCM patients of their pre-operative neurological function, as assessed by the mJOA scale, has not been examined. This study therefore aimed to evaluate recall accuracy in DCM patients using the mJOA scale.

Methods: This study analyzed recall capacity of DCM patients who had undergone anterior cervical discectomy and fusion by a single surgeon at a large academic spine center between February 2012 and August 2017. Patient recall of neurological function pre-surgery was assessed at 3, 12, and 24 months post-surgery using the mJOA scale. Actual mJOA scores were also determined at each follow-up. Recall error was defined as the difference between recalled mJOA score at each postoperative visit and the actual baseline score. Age, gender, surgical segments, hospital length of stay, actual mJOA scores at follow-up, and actual rate of improvement in mJOA score were analyzed as predictors of recall accuracy. Descriptive statistics were collected to profile the characteristics of patients enrolled in the study cohort. All statistical computing and graphing were performed with R software and GEE model fitting was done using geepack package.

Results: A total of 105 patients (56.2% male; 43.8% female) were enrolled in the study. The median \pm SD (range) age at the pre-surgical baseline measurement was 50 ± 8 (25-78) years. The recalled mJOA scores at the three follow-up time points were lower than the actual mJOA scores. The recall accuracy gradually decreased over time. Estimated coefficients showed that all variables in the GEE model except for surgical fusion segments were significant ($P < 0.05$). The preoperative actual baseline mJOA score was inversely associated with recall error. An increasing actual mJOA score over time had a significant positive influence on recall error. Greater recall error was found in males compared to females. Unexpectedly, age was inversely associated with recall error.

Conclusions: The recall error increases with the time interval between presurgical measurement and post-surgical follow-up and is more prominent in male DCMs patients following upper spine surgery.

Relevance for patients: It is necessary to select postoperative patients who need to pay attention according to the three factors of postoperative time, gender and age, that is, patients with large recall error should be given early or timely psychological counseling and treatment concerns, so as to reduce the occurrence of potential medical disputes and improve the level of medical safety.

Keywords: degenerative cervical myelopathy, anterior cervical discectomy, intervertebral fusion, neurological function, patient-reported outcomes, recall error

1. Introduction

Patient-reported outcomes (PROs) play a crucial role in quantifying postoperative pain and assessing a patient's quality of life after surgery¹. However, while PROs facilitate and improve quantitative data collection, their inherent subjectivity exposes PROs to individual interpretation, inaccurate self-reporting, and the patient's potential inability to recall pre-intervention injury².

The modified Japanese Orthopaedic Association (mJOA) score is an investigator-administered tool used to evaluate neurological function in patients with degenerative cervical myelopathy (DCM). It is an 18-point scale that addresses upper (5 points) and lower extremity (7 points) motor function, sensation (3 points) and micturition (3 points). In the literature, there are reports of a patient-derived version of the mJOA for the patients to report their conditions. There are also publications on validating the PRO version of the JOA score. Although the PRO-JOA was deemed comparable to the mJOA, the PRO-JOA and mJOA scores should be regarded as different outcomes. The mJOA score is not a PRO in that it is an assessment conducted by physicians, allied health professionals, or trained staff. Furthermore, there is controversy about whether the mJOA should be administered retrospectively to patients in the absence of a baseline score to ascertain their recollection of the preoperative state.

Recall bias is a well-known source of systematic error in clinical research. It is a differential form of misclassification bias and the risk estimation may deviate or move to zero.^{2,3} Although many orthopedic studies have reported recall bias⁴⁻⁹, only few studies have reported the accuracy of recall of PROs in patients with DCM. The purpose of this study was therefore to (1) study the accuracy of patients' recall of preoperative neurological function after anterior cervical discectomy and fusion (ACDF); (2) describe the direction and magnitude of bias; and (3) evaluate the overall consistency between the actual mJOA score and the recall mJOA score in a Chinese patient cohort. We used the mJOA scale to perform an accuracy study of preoperative neurological function recall in patients with DCM who had undergone ACDF.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design

This study analyzed retrospective data on DCM patients at a large academic spine center where ACDF was performed by a single surgeon between February 2012 and August 2017. Patient recall of neurological function at 3, 12, and 24 months after surgery was compared to preoperative actual baseline scores according to the mJOA scale (1994 version). Our mJOA comprises a validated 17-point measure of neurological function in this patient population, with 0 indicating the most significant functional impairment and 17 indicating no neurological debilitation (see online data supplement).

Recall error (RE) was defined as the difference between recalled mJOA score and the actual baseline score at each postoperative visit (POV) and analyzed for age, gender, surgical segments, length of stay, current actual mJOA scores, and actual rates of improvement in patient recall accuracy. Approval from the Peking University Third Hospital medical ethics committee was obtained before initializing the study under approval number M2020380.

2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria of patients with DCM after ACDF surgery.

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Diagnosis of cervical spondylotic myelopathy• Clinical symptoms of cervical spondylotic myelopathy• Preoperative mJOA score of ≤ 13• Radiological examination with degenerative cervical stenosis and cervical cord decompression• Aged ≥ 18 y at the time of surgery	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Only radiculopathy symptoms, symptoms or deterioration due to cervical trauma• Radiological examination of the posterior longitudinal ligament, with neoplastic, infectious, or metabolic disease• History of cervical surgery or cervical deformity• Underwent surgery other than ACDF (e.g., simultaneous vitrectomy, laminoplasty, etc.)• Loss or inability to be interviewed during follow-up, incomplete documentation

Abbreviations: DCM, degenerative cervical myelopathy; ACDF, anterior cervical discectomy and fusion; mJOA, modified Japanese Orthopaedic Association

2.3. Data collection

The four key time points in the study were 3 days prior to surgery and 3, 12, and 24 months after surgery. The mJOA score was calculated at the four key time points after the patients had filled out the questionnaire. A baseline mJOA score was obtained within 3 days prior to surgery as part of standard care. At 3, 12, and 24 months after surgery patients were asked to recall their baseline mJOA score. Furthermore, the actual mJOA scores reflecting the patient's functional status at the time of measurement were recorded. Descriptive statistics were collected to describe the characteristics of patients enrolled in the study cohort.

The two-sided paired t-test and the Wilcoxon signed-rank test were used to evaluate the mean difference between the recalled and preoperative actual baseline mJOA. The Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to determine the correlation between recalled and preoperative actual baselines JOA, with 0 representing no correlation and 1 representing perfect correlation.

RE, calculated as the difference between recalled and preoperative actual baseline mJOA (i.e., recalled mJOA minus preoperative actual baseline mJOA), was used to measure recall accuracy. Positive RE indicates that the numerical value of the recalled mJOA minus the preoperative actual baseline mJOA was greater than the actual score, while negative recall error indicates the opposite. For those who recalled a baseline mJOA equal to the actual score, the RE was zero.

Generalized estimating equation (GEE) was developed by Liang and Zeger (1986)¹⁰ to produce more efficient and unbiased regression estimates when analyzing longitudinal or repeated measures research designs with non-normal response variables. GEE can cope with correlated data within subjects¹⁰. The greatest advantage of the GEE model is that there is no need to specify the whole distribution of the response. Only the mean structure, the mean-variance relationship, and specification of the covariance structure need to be defined¹¹.

We used GEE¹² to detect the association between a series of predictors and RE. In our model, the dependent variable was the mJOA RE. Independent variables included (1) the preoperative actual baseline mJOA, (2) the actual mJOA on each visit, (3) gender, (4) age at the time of surgery, and (5) time between baseline and follow-up (in months). The GEE was as follows:

$$\text{RE}(\text{RecallError}_{it}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{JOAPreop}_{it} + \beta_2 \text{JOAActual}_{it} + \beta_3 \text{SurgeryNo}_{it} + \beta_4 \text{Visit}_{it} + \beta_5 \text{Age}_{it} + \beta_6 \text{Gender}_{it}; \quad t = 3, 12, 24; \quad i = 1, \dots, n$$

where JOAPreop represents preoperative baseline mJOA score, JOAActual represents actual mJOA score at each visit, SurgeryNo represents surgical fusion segments, age is age at time of surgery, and Visit represents the time between baseline measurement and follow-up (in months). Because we found no evidence indicating notable interaction between the independent variables, interaction

terms were not included in our model. For the working correlation structure in GEE, we considered both exchangeable working correlation and AR(1) working correlation. All statistical computing and graphing were done in the R platform¹³. GEE model fitting and diagnostics were performed with the glmttoolbox package¹⁴.

3. RESULTS

A total of 105 patients (56.2% males; 43.8% females) were enrolled in the study from February 2012 to August 2017. The median \pm SD (range) age at baseline was 50 ± 8 (25-78) years. Figure 1 displays the boxplots of recalled and actual mJOA scores at the 3 visits (at 3, 12, and 24 months follow-up). For boxplots, the recalled mJOA score at three follow-up time points was less than the actual mJOA. The dispersion of recalled mJOA scores became larger over time, meaning that recall accuracy gradually decreased.

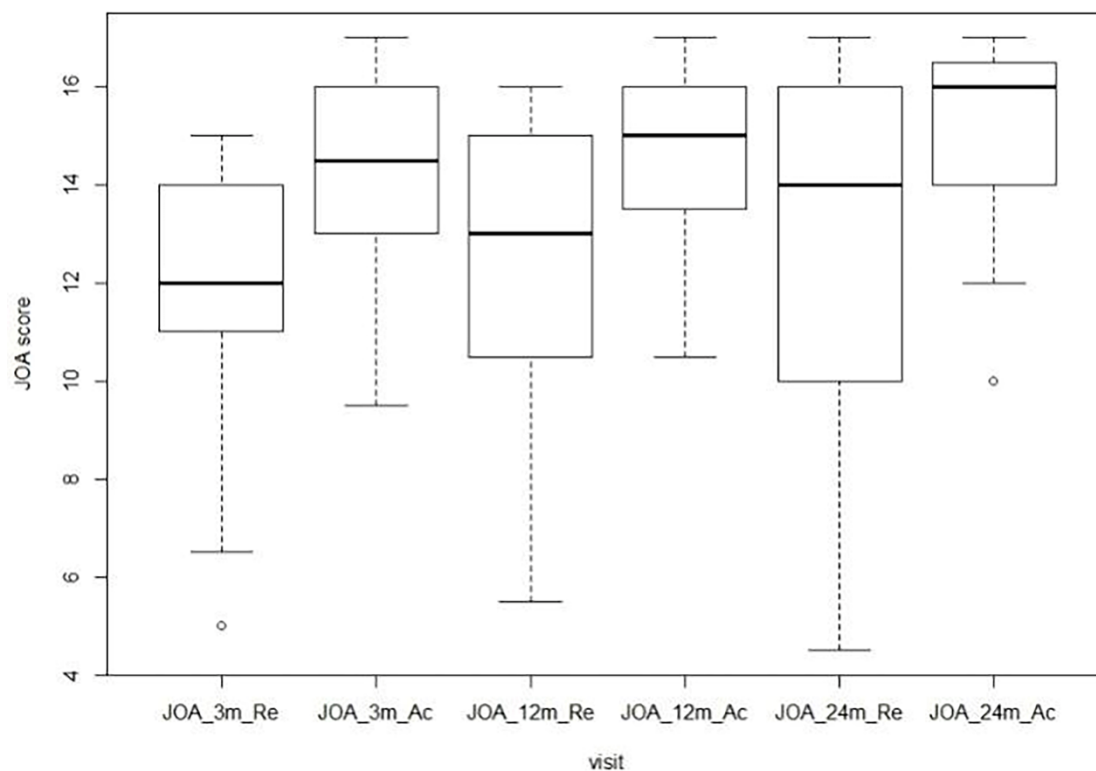


Figure 1. Recalled and actual mJOA scores at the three visits. JOA_3m_Re, JOA_12m_Re, JOA_24m_Re signify recalled mJOA scores at 3, 12, and 24 months, respectively. JOA_3m_Ac, JOA_12m_Ac, JOA_24m_Ac signify actual mJOA scores at 3, 12, and 24 months, respectively.

Figures 2-4 show scatter plots of recalled versus actual mJOA scores at each visit. Figure 5 presents the RE for the 3 visits. Figure 6 represents a scatterplot of RE vs. actual mJOA score change by gender. Table 2 provides results of correlation test between recalled and actual mJOA scores, which were significantly correlated at each visit. The Pearson correlation coefficients between recalled errors for 3 visits are given in Table 3, indicating that there was a time effect on recall errors and that the AR(1) working correlation was probably more preferred. Table 4 presents the result analysis of the GEE model.

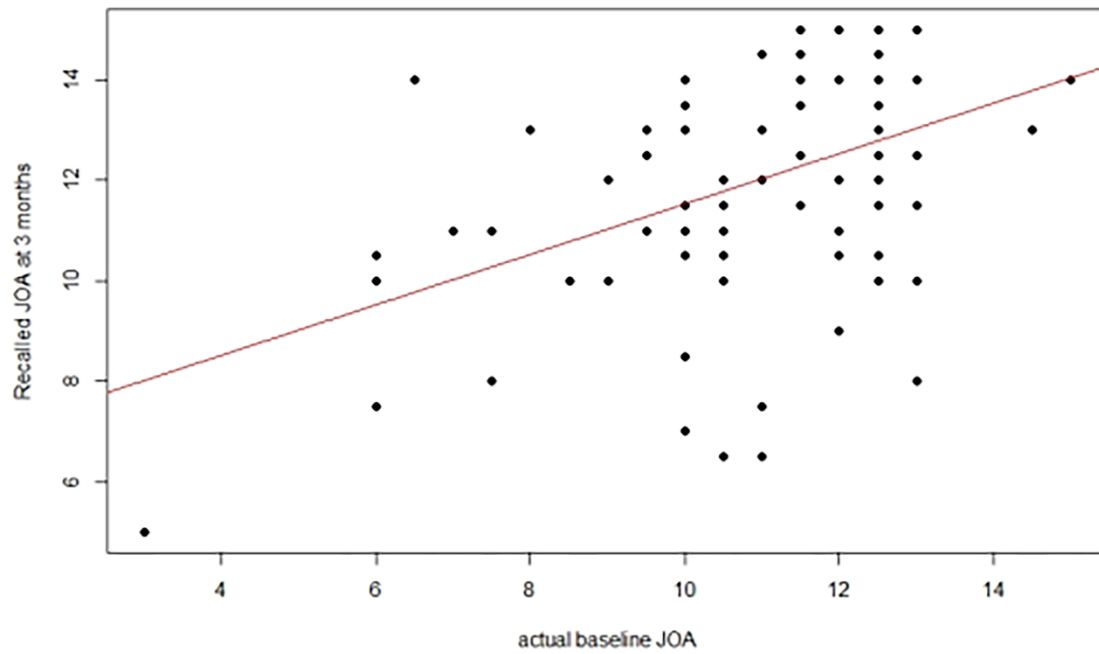


Figure 2. Scatter plot of recalled mJOA scores at 3 months vs. actual mJOA scores.

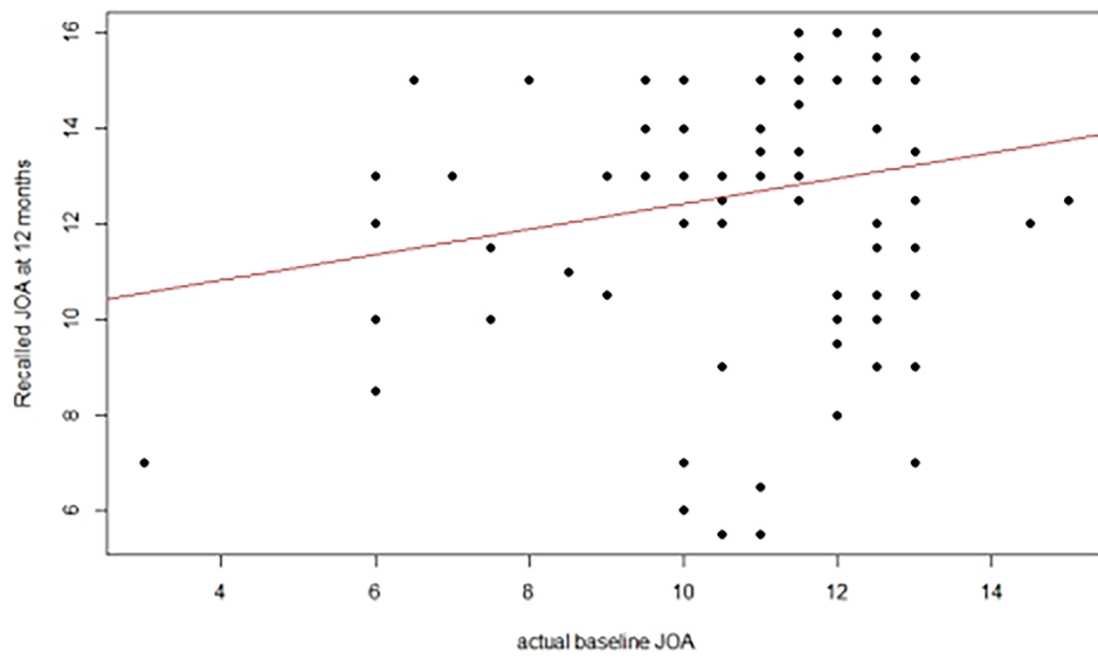


Figure 3. Scatter plot of recalled mJOA scores at 12 months vs. actual mJOA scores.

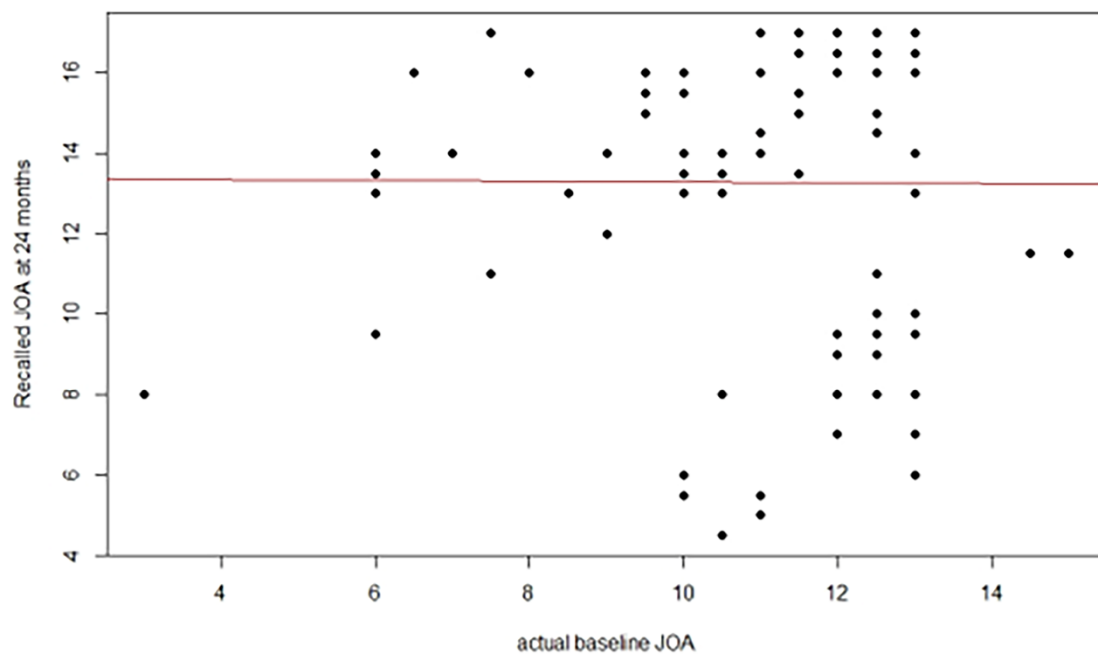


Figure 4. Scatter plot of recalled mJOA scores at 24 months vs. actual mJOA scores.

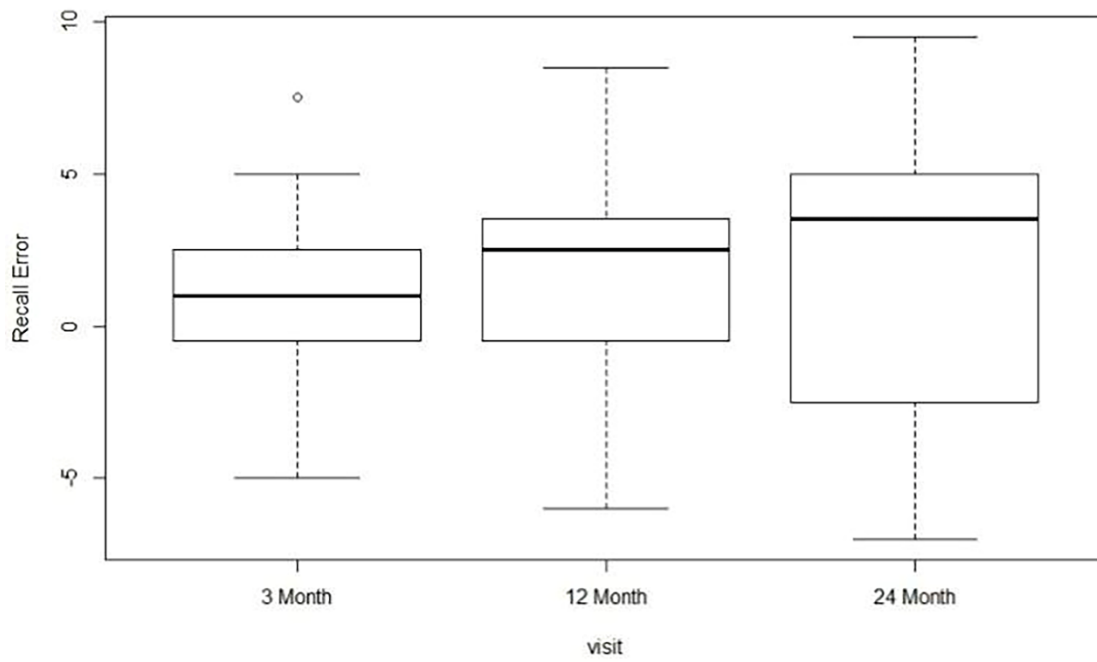


Figure 5. Recall error of the preoperative actual baseline mJOA score at each visit.

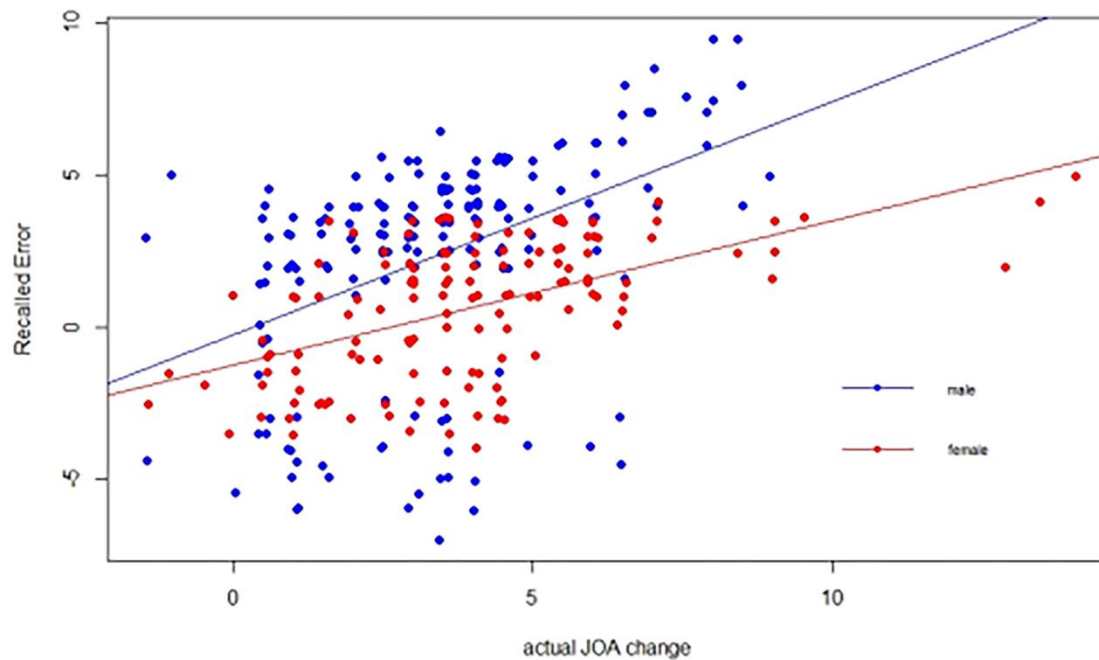


Figure 6. Scatter plot of recall error vs. actual mJOA score change stratified by gender.

Table 2. Pearson correlation between recalled and actual baseline mJOA score.

Follow-up time	Pearson's <i>r</i>
3 months	0.4545 (P = 0.0000)
12 months	0.1964 (P = 0.0445)
24 months	-0.0048 (P = 0.9612)

Table 3. Pearson correlation between recall errors of three visits.

Comparison groups	Pearson's <i>r</i>
3 months vs. 12 months	0.9498 (P = 0.000)
3 months vs. 24 months	0.9177 (P = 0.000)
12 months vs. 24 months	0.9679 (P = 0.000)

In the first step of our model fitting procedure, we fit the GEE model for two working correlation matrices, namely exchangeable and AR(1). We found that there were no significant differences between these two settings; the QIC was 2177.62 and 2181.72, respectively, and the coefficients were similar. The estimated correlation parameters were 0.8499 with a standard error of 0.0266 for AR(1) working correlation and 0.8106 with a standard error of 0.0324 for exchangeable working correlation. Upon inspection of the residuals yielded by those models we found several outliers.

In the second step, we excluded the outliers with residuals less than -6 retrieved in the first step. A total of 96 subjects were retained and 9 subjects were excluded. Subsequently the model with AR(1) working correlation was fitted. The refitted model's QIC was now 854.26, which had a significant decrease from the first step. The estimated correlation parameter was 0.6767 with a standard error of 0.0660.

Table 4 provides the results for the refitted model. As becomes evident from Table 4, all variables except Surgery No were significant ($P < 0.05$). The most significant variables were JOAPreop, Visit, Gender, and Age. All estimated coefficient signs were consistent with expectations. The greater the preoperative actual baseline mJOA score, the smaller the RE. Actual mJOA score increases had a significant positive influence on RE, but its effects were less than the baseline mJOA score. The RE increased with follow-up interval length, as was expected. Greater RE was found in males than in females. The variable Age had a negative effect on RE, indicating that elderly patients exhibited smaller RE.

Table 4. Result analysis of the GEE model.

Coefficient	Estimate	Standard Error	Wald	P (> W)
Intercept	12.0341	1.7914	45.1261	0.0000
mJOAPreop	-0.6670	0.0867	59.1407	0.0000
mJOAActual	0.1785	0.0607	8.6548	0.0033
SurgeryNo	0.3354	0.2292	2.1429	0.1432
Visit	0.0631	0.0108	34.3728	0.0000
Age	-0.0518	0.0238	4.7530	0.0292
Gender	-2.6695	0.3350	63.4864	0.0000

4. DISCUSSION

Patients with DCM recalled preoperative neurological function during two years following ACDF surgery using the mJOA scoring system. From 3 to 24 months, patients' recall of preoperative neurological function grew increasingly erroneous, showing a definite time effect. The recall deviation was smaller at 3 months than at 12 months and 24 months. The findings of this study indicated that, on the one hand, the accuracy of recall differed abated with follow-up time, which echoes several other studies.^{4,7,15} On the other hand, relying on patient recall did not provide an accurate assessment of the preoperative status, which is also consistent with several other studies assessing patient recall bias^{5,6,8,9,16-18}. Some scholars also pointed out that recall accuracy may be determined by patient characteristics as well as characteristics of the exposure of interest^{3,8,19}. In a cohort of patients diagnosed with anterior cruciate ligament injury and who were followed for 2 years, Randsborg et al.²⁰ noted that the recall bias of preinjury knee function following anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction was small and not clinically meaningful for the majority of patients. However, patients with poor outcome had a clinically relevant and significant recall bias. Coincidentally, in a cohort of back pain patients followed for 10 years, Dawson et al.⁸ found that radicular symptoms, frequency and location of pain, and activities affecting pain were recalled with

greater accuracy than specific qualities of pain such as severity. Our study focused on the total score of the mJOA and did not refine the score of each subgroup, so no more detailed conclusions could be drawn. However, the aforementioned studies revealed that by refining the grouping of the study, broadening of patient characteristics, and fully exposing the research subjects, the recall bias would show different characteristics. Pellisé et al. reported significantly worse recalled preoperative symptoms in patients undergoing spinal fusion for lower back pain⁹. Lowe et al.¹⁸ showed that patients were able to recall preoperative function with considerable accuracy for up to 12 months after total shoulder arthroplasty. However, beyond 6 weeks postoperatively, patients recalled having worse pain than they originally reported. This trend was also confirmed in the present study. Boxplots of the study in Figure 1 showed the recalled mJOA scores at three follow-up time points were less than the actual mJOA scores and the dispersion of recalled mJOA scores became vaster over time, meaning that recall accuracy gradually decreased.

The larger the preoperative baseline mJOA, the smaller the recall error. Actual mJOA score increases positively affected recall error, although less than the baseline mJOA. The baseline value affected accuracy. This may be explained by the possibility that individuals with a high preoperative baseline value had less room for postoperative mJOA score improvement, and memory error was small.

Males had worse recall than females. On the one hand, in a multicenter MRI study of mild traumatic brain injury, Shetty et al.²¹ pointed out that the female gender was associated with an increase in symptom severity scores at every time point when studying RE. In other words, women had a greater RE than men. Although the above study²¹ also focused on recall bias, the conclusions based on gender are contrary to the present study, and the reason for the analysis may be that the different characteristics of the study subjects caused the differences in findings. On the other hand, Holden et al.²² pointed out that women placed relatively more emphasis on categorical cues, while men relied more heavily on metric information when they examined ambidextrous individual differences in the relative weighting of these cues in spatial location memory. This study showed why recall in men was better than in women. Men depended more on references and relative

evidence for recall, whereas women looked for direct or absolute evidence, resulting in less recall bias in women.

Three limitations should be noted in the present study. First, although our preoperative and postoperative mJOA scores were completed face-to-face and further evaluated in the investigator-guided patient setting, they were prone to responder bias because of the retrospective nature of the study²³. The previous psychometric studies showed that retrospective studies were not more accurate than the differences in prospective recordings^{3, 24}. In a retrospective study, the treatment responders had the advantages of recalibrated postoperative self-reported results compared with non-responders¹⁸. Meanwhile, this shift in response might evolve over time because the personal experiences of the patient, where their own internal standards and expectations of treatment effects may play an important role²⁵. This was one of the systematic biases, but it might be eliminated in prospective studies. To overcome these biases, recall adjustment calculation and sensitivity analysis were recommended in some studies²⁶. These highlighted the importance of collecting PROs prospectively and not retrospectively. Further prospective studies are needed to evaluate the effectiveness of these change score calculations for mJOA scores.

Second, relevant literature²⁷ revealed that the Oswestry Disability Index (ODI) score has been proven to serve more like a function of content than the format presented by the project. When patients were asked to fill in the ODI questionnaire repeatedly at different follow-up time points, they might have "learned" the ODI-related problems, resulting in systematic bias. However, during treatment, the ODI's repeated disability assessment had stable psychometric characteristics, so it would not be the main source of bias²⁷. Since there was no part on psychological measurement in the mJOA score, patients who had "learned" in the previous follow-up might have been primed for the abovementioned systematic bias. The future direction is to add the appropriate psychological measurement questionnaire to the research to avoid systematic bias to the greatest possible extent.

Third, our study focused specifically on longer-term follow-up (at least 2 years postoperatively), with the first follow-up time point being 3 months after surgery. However, some studies have pointed out that the accuracy of recall was higher when the postoperative follow-up

time was 1 to 7 days^{28, 29}. In addition, Marsh et al.³⁰ pointed out that patients undergoing total hip arthroplasty could accurately recall their preoperative health status at 6 weeks postoperatively. The factor “Age” had negative effects on recall error, meaning that older patients exhibited smaller RE. There were no relevant conclusions in published literature for us to compare. Accordingly, it is possible that DCM patients might have greater recall accuracy at shorter-term follow-up (e.g., up to 6 weeks), which was not probed in this study. Future recall bias studies should therefore include shorter time frames.

5. Conclusions

There was a significant time effect on the recall accuracy of mJOA scores at follow-up in that the RE increased with follow-up time interval. Greater recall error was found in males compared to females.

The research on the accuracy of recall error was conducted mainly to understand the retrospective ability and accuracy of DCM patients' preoperative neurological function after surgery. We found that the postoperative recall time and male population were negative predictors of recall accuracy.

During postoperative follow-up we met with patients who suffered from unsatisfactory neurological function recovery and no obvious symptom relief. These visits required us to invest much patience and energy to help the patients recall their preoperative neurological function as much as possible. By browsing the data of previous mJOA scores, the accurate preoperative neurological status of the patient could be retrieved. By comparing the data to the postoperative results, the patient can more intuitively and objectively understand the real changes as a result of the surgery. This could help patients to become more appreciative of the surgical intervention. Owing to this study, we recommend that the abovementioned patient groups require more healthcare-related attention to reduce the occurrence of potential medical disputes and improve medical safety by placating patients' dissatisfaction or anxiety.

In future studies, we need to include patients with posterior cervical spine surgery and even lumbar spine surgery, expand the study scope, and add different types of surgery as a factor. Future studies should preferably be carried out prospectively to reduce selection bias.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Epub ahead of print

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