

REVIEW



# Extracorporeal carbon dioxide removal (ECCO<sub>2</sub>R) in patients with acute respiratory failure

Andrea Morelli<sup>1</sup>, Lorenzo Del Sorbo<sup>2,3</sup>, Antonio Pesenti<sup>4</sup>, V. Marco Ranieri<sup>1</sup> and Eddy Fan<sup>2,3\*</sup>

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**Purpose:** To review the available knowledge related to the use of ECCO<sub>2</sub>R as adjuvant strategy to mechanical ventilation (MV) in various clinical settings of acute respiratory failure (ARF).

**Methods:** Expert opinion and review of the literature.

**Results:** ECCO<sub>2</sub>R may be a promising adjuvant therapeutic strategy for the management of patients with severe exacerbations of COPD and for the achievement of protective or ultra-protective ventilation in patients with ARDS without life-threatening hypoxemia. Given the observational nature of most of the available clinical data and differences in technical features and performances of current devices, the balance of risks and benefits for or against ECCO<sub>2</sub>R in such patient populations remains unclear

**Conclusions:** ECCO<sub>2</sub>R is currently an experimental technique rather than an accepted therapeutic strategy in ARF—its safety and efficacy require confirmation in clinical trials.

**Keywords:** Critical care, Extracorporeal CO<sub>2</sub> removal, Intensive care units, Respiratory distress syndrome, Adult, Respiratory failure, Review, Ventilation, Artificial

## Introduction

Extracorporeal carbon dioxide removal (ECCO<sub>2</sub>R) is a technique providing artificial respiratory support by removal of CO<sub>2</sub> from blood through an extracorporeal gas exchanger, and is a feature of several strategies of extracorporeal life support, including venovenous (VV) and arteriovenous (AV) extracorporeal membrane oxygenation [1, 2]. However, low flow VV devices which provide CO<sub>2</sub> removal but not oxygenation are emerging as a potential respiratory support strategy [3–7]. Although originally developed as a means to improve the respiratory management of patients with ARDS [8], advances in technology and a better knowledge of the technique have enabled its use in other clinical syndromes, such as severe asthma or decompensated chronic obstructive

pulmonary disease (COPD) and as a bridge to transplantation [9–11]. This review article will summarize the available knowledge related to the use of ECCO<sub>2</sub>R as adjuvant strategy to mechanical ventilation (MV) in various clinical settings of acute respiratory failure (ARF).

## The detrimental consequences of hypercapnia

ECCO<sub>2</sub>R is applied to avoid excessive hypercapnia and its detrimental effects resulting from the pathophysiological changes of the respiratory system or from specific MV protective strategies (permissive hypercapnia).

Severe hypercapnia may negatively affect extrapulmonary organ function, particularly the brain and the cardiovascular system. By increasing cerebral blood flow, hypercapnia elevates intracranial pressure [12]. Hypercapnic acidosis increases pulmonary vasoconstriction and, in addition to microvascular alterations and to the effects of positive-pressure MV, dramatically increases right ventricular (RV) afterload [13]. At the same time,

\*Correspondence: eddy.fan@uhn.ca

<sup>3</sup> Extracorporeal Life Support Program, Toronto General Hospital, 585 University Avenue, PMB 11-123, Toronto, ON M5G 2N2, Canada  
Full author information is available at the end of the article

hypercapnia and hypercapnic acidosis decrease myocardial contractility. This altered hemodynamic profile contributes to RV-arterial decoupling and acute RV dysfunction [13, 14].

However, the clinical implications of hypercapnia and hypercapnic acidosis on the lung have not been fully elucidated. It has been hypothesized that hypercapnia may attenuate pulmonary inflammation by affecting several pathways. Experimental models have reported that hypercapnia reduces the production of superoxide as well as other free radical compounds and decreases the release of tumor necrosis factor  $\alpha$  (TNF- $\alpha$ ) and interleukin-1 (IL-1) from macrophages. Furthermore, hypercapnic acidosis attenuates lung injury by reducing inflammation via inhibition of NF- $\kappa$ B activity [14]. These data support the hypothesis that hypercapnic acidosis may attenuate lung and other organ injury in septic lung injury [14]. However, these beneficial effects may be the result of systemic acidosis rather than hypercapnia per se, as buffering the pH worsened lung injury [15]. Conversely, hypercapnic acidosis may contribute to lung injury by increasing both the production of nitric oxide and inflammation, and impair alveolar epithelial cell function by causing the endocytosis of Na<sup>+</sup>/K<sup>+</sup> ATPase. Finally, due to its immunosuppressive properties, hypercapnic acidosis may worsen lung injury by exacerbating pulmonary bacterial infection [14]. Given the contradictory nature of these findings, further research is needed to clarify the relationship between hypercapnic acidosis and such complex pathophysiological pathways.

### Principles of the technique

ECCO<sub>2</sub>R devices include a drainage cannula placed in a central vein (VV systems) or artery (AV systems), an artificial lung, and a return cannula into the venous system (Fig. 1) [16–18]. Early roller or peristaltic pumps have been now replaced by centrifugal or diagonal pumps with radial rotating impellers which generate the driving pressure with lower blood trauma [3, 16–18]. Pumpless devices can be used only in the AV configuration. However, a mean arterial pressure of at least 70 mmHg or an arteriovenous pressure gradient  $\geq$ 60 mmHg are required to guarantee a sufficient blood flow in the circuit, and a cardiac index higher than 3 L/min/m<sup>2</sup> has to be maintained, as a proportion of cardiac output which passes through the ECCO<sub>2</sub>R does not affect peripheral perfusion [3, 16–19]. The presence of hemodynamic instability and/or heart failure that often characterize critically ill patients may therefore limit the use of such devices. Advances in technology, design, and materials in newer ECCO<sub>2</sub>R systems have allowed a reduction in the degree of anticoagulation required to maintain the performance of these devices. During ECCO<sub>2</sub>R, the application

high sweep fresh gas flow generates a diffusion gradient which allows CO<sub>2</sub> removal (Fig. 2) [16–18]. In addition, it depends on the blood flow to the membrane: 1 L of blood contains around 500 mL of CO<sub>2</sub> or more and the CO<sub>2</sub> production per minute is about 200–250 mL/min, thus a blood flow of 0.5 L/min would be sufficient to remove all of the CO<sub>2</sub> produced by the body [3, 16–18]. Accordingly, ECCO<sub>2</sub>R systems can now provide clinically meaningful levels of CO<sub>2</sub> removal with relatively low blood flow (300–1000 mL/min), although CO<sub>2</sub> removal may be enhanced with higher blood flow (i.e., “mid-flow” of 1000–2000 mL/min) [65]. Although it has been reported that a blood flow of 300–500 mL/min potentially replaces about 50% or more of the exchange function of the native lung [3, 16–18], the percentage is very often lower, as it depends on the actual blood CO<sub>2</sub> content, hemoglobin concentration and the exchange performance of the membrane. Therefore, ECCO<sub>2</sub>R may typically remove about 25% of total CO<sub>2</sub> production [3, 16–18]. Recent experimental investigations have focused on enhancing the efficiency in CO<sub>2</sub> removal by acidification of the extracorporeal blood in animal models and electro dialysis with promising results [20, 21].

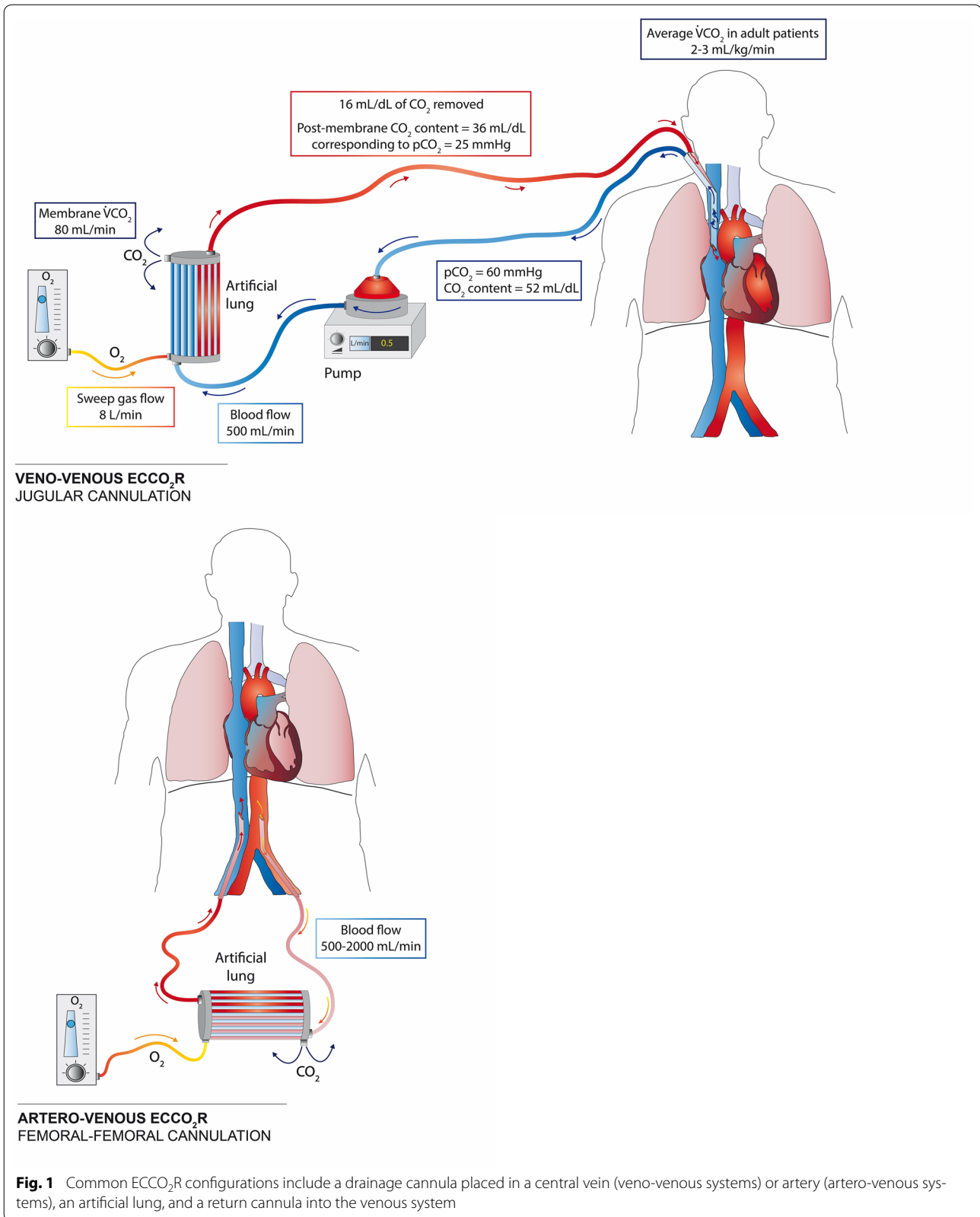
The choice of the vascular access and the type of cannulas depend on the configuration of the circuit. The AV configuration usually requires two single-lumen wire-reinforced femoral arterial and venous cannulas which enable the drainage and the return of blood, respectively. As the heart is the driving pump in the AV configuration, the cannulas should be large enough to reduce resistance to blood flow [16–19]. Conversely, the presence of pumps in the newer VV ECCO<sub>2</sub>R systems enables the use of dual-lumen catheters, with blood flows between 300 and 1500 mL/min.

### Potential clinical indications for ECCO<sub>2</sub>R

The current evidence regarding the use of ECCO<sub>2</sub>R in various forms of ARF remains limited, with most of the data coming from small case series and observational studies conducted in expert centers.

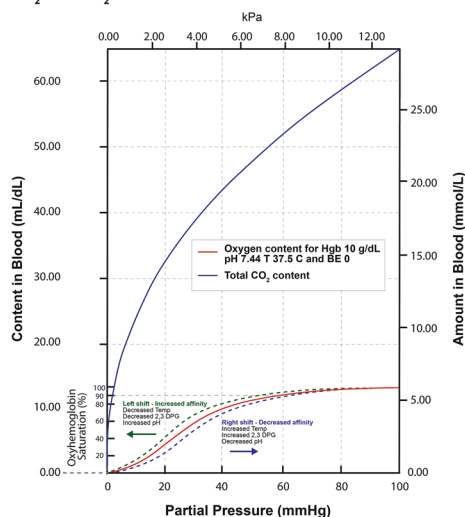
#### Role of ECCO<sub>2</sub>R in ARDS patients

Mechanical ventilation, the mainstay treatment for ARDS, carries the risk of several adverse effects, the most important being ventilator-induced lung injury (VILI) as a consequence of an inhomogeneous lung overdistension. This secondary lung injury contributes to increasing the release of inflammatory mediators, which may negatively affect extra-pulmonary organ function [22]. Lung-protective ventilatory strategies have been demonstrated to improve patient outcomes [22–24]. Nevertheless, recent studies have shown that, even after applying protective MV, lung injury may still occur [22–26]. Further



**CO<sub>2</sub> in the blood**

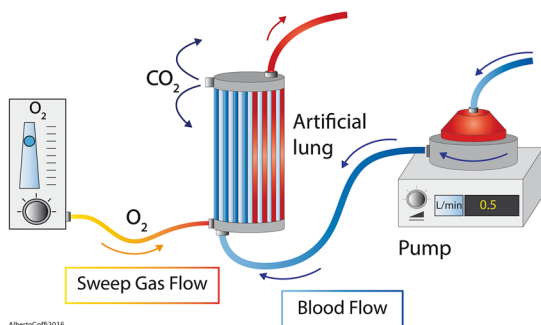
- Dissociated into bicarbonate and hydrogen ions
- Bound to proteins/hemoglobin
- Dissolved
  - High solubility in plasma
  - Linear and steep dissociation curve without saturation
  - Elevated diffusion rate across the artificial lung

**O<sub>2</sub> and CO<sub>2</sub> content vs Partial Pressure****Clearance of CO<sub>2</sub> in the artificial lung**

- Highly efficient
- Dependent on
  - Diffusion gradient across the artificial lung
  - Artificial lung-blood contact time
  - Artificial lung diffusion characteristics

Dependent on:

- CO<sub>2</sub> blood content
- Flow of gas through the artificial lung (sweep gas flow: usually > 8 L/min)
- Artificial lung total surface area/geometry
- Blood flow through the artificial lung (ECCO<sub>2</sub>R blood flow)
  - In *veno-venous* modality dependent on:
    - Size of the cannula
    - Recirculation of blood in the ECLS circuit
    - Efficiency of the ECCO<sub>2</sub>R pump
    - Total surface area of the oxygenator
    - Cardiac preload
  - In *artero-venous* modality dependent on:
    - Cardiac output
    - Systemic blood pressure
    - Peripheral vascular resistance
    - Size of the cannula
    - Total surface area of the oxygenator



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**CO<sub>2</sub> Removal in the artificial lung**

**Fig. 2** CO<sub>2</sub> clearance during ECCO<sub>2</sub>R is dependent on a number of factors, including CO<sub>2</sub> blood content, artificial lung surface area, and both the sweep gas and blood flow rates through the artificial lung

reductions in tidal volume may therefore limit VILI, potentially decreasing mortality [22]. The potential benefits of limiting VILI further have resulted in a growing interest in ECCO<sub>2</sub>R as an adjuvant strategy in patients with ARDS (Table 1) [16].

ECCO<sub>2</sub>R was first proposed as a response to the failure of the NIH-funded RCT of ECMO in adults with severe ARF [27]. Differences in MV between treated and control groups were primarily limited to changes in the FiO<sub>2</sub>. This is due to the fact that, in the early 1970s, MV was set to optimize oxygenation by increasing airway pressures, tidal volumes, and FiO<sub>2</sub>, and oxygen toxicity was thought at the time as the most relevant damaging factor

associated with MV. The potential for VILI was largely unrecognized and ignored.

At that time, however, Gattinoni and Kolobow worked on ECCO<sub>2</sub>R [28]. Control of CO<sub>2</sub> by the artificial lung allowed complete control of ventilation, either spontaneous or mechanical, providing lung rest. The evolving conceptual paradigm, therefore, was to use extracorporeal support to rest the lung in order to avoid VILI, which was hypothesized but not yet confirmed [29]. Well before the benefits of lung protective ventilation could be shown in clinical trials, the application of ECCO<sub>2</sub>R in ARDS patients was effective in decreasing barotrauma in small clinical series [29, 30]. ECCO<sub>2</sub>R with blood flow in the

**Table 1 Relevant clinical studies of ECCO<sub>2</sub>R in ARDS patients**

Study	ECCO <sub>2</sub> R technique	Notes
Terragni et al. [34]	Modified continuous VV hemofiltration system with membrane lung via a 14-Fr single dual lumen catheter (femoral) with an extracorporeal blood flow of 191–422 mL/min	<p>Prospective study</p> <p>Ten ARDS patients with <math>28 \leq P_{plat} \leq 30</math> after 72 h of ARDSNet ventilation were placed on ECCO<sub>2</sub>R and had progressive reduction in <math>V_T</math></p> <p><math>V_T</math> was reduced from <math>6.3 \pm 0.2</math> to <math>4.2 \pm 0.3</math> mL/kg PBW and <math>P_{plat}</math> decreased from <math>29.1 \pm 1.2</math> to <math>25.0 \pm 1.2</math> cmH<sub>2</sub>O (<math>p &lt; 0.001</math>)</p> <p>Consequent respiratory acidosis was managed by ECCO<sub>2</sub>R</p> <p>Improvement of morphological markers of lung protection and reduction in pulmonary cytokines (<math>p &lt; 0.01</math>) after 72 h of ventilation with <math>V_T &lt; 6</math> mL/kg PBW</p> <p>No patient-related complications</p> <p>Membrane clotting in three patients</p>
Bein et al. [35]	Femoral AV pumpless extracorporeal lung assist (PECLA) via a 15-Fr arterial cannula and 17-Fr venous cannula with a mean extracorporeal blood flow of 1.3 L/min	<p>Randomized controlled trial</p> <p>Moderate/severe ARDS after 24-h stabilization period with higher PEEP</p> <p>Randomized to ECCO<sub>2</sub>R group with ~3 mL/kg PBW ventilation or control group with ~6 mL/kg PBW ventilation</p> <p>There were no significant differences in VFDs at day 28 (10 vs. 9 days, <math>p = 0.78</math>) or day 60 (33 vs. 29, <math>p = 0.47</math>)</p> <p>Post hoc analysis showed that patients with <math>P/F \leq 150</math> at randomization in ECCO<sub>2</sub>R group had significantly shorter duration of ventilation (VFDs at day 60, 41 vs. 28, <math>p = 0.033</math>)</p> <p>Significantly higher red blood cell transfusion in the PECLA group up to day 10 (3.7 vs. 1.5 units; <math>p &lt; 0.05</math>)</p>
Fanelli et al. [6]	VV configuration via a 15.5-Fr single dual lumen catheter (femoral or jugular) with a mean extracorporeal blood flow of 435 mL/min	<p>Prospective study</p> <p>Moderate/severe ARDS</p> <p><math>V_T</math> was reduced from baseline to 4 mL/kg PBW</p> <p>Low-flow ECCO<sub>2</sub>R was initiated when <math>pH &lt; 7.25</math> and <math>PaCO_2 &gt; 60</math> mmHg</p> <p>ECCO<sub>2</sub>R was effective in correcting pH and <math>PaCO_2</math></p> <p>Life-threatening hypoxemia such as prone position and ECMO were necessary in four and two patients, respectively</p>

range of 1.5–2.5 L/min was coupled to low-frequency, low-pressure ventilation with higher PEEP levels and lower driving pressure and respiratory rate. With these settings, the native lung only provides some oxygenation, while the artificial lung removes CO<sub>2</sub> and supports the remaining oxygenation needs.

As a mean to simplify the technique, AV pumpless techniques were proposed to provide ECCO<sub>2</sub>R [31]. But it was only when low-resistance capillary membrane lungs became available that AV ECCO<sub>2</sub>R became popular, though initially proposed as a mean to provide oxygenation rather than as a lung-protective adjunct [32]. Later, Terragni et al. showed that up to a third of ARDS patients were at still at risk of VILI despite being ventilated according to the ARDSNet protocol (<6 mL/kg PBW) [33]. In an attempt to reduce VILI, they used ECCO<sub>2</sub>R (blood flow 300 mL/min) to decrease tidal volume to less than 4 mL/kg PBW, while maintaining normal pH and PaCO<sub>2</sub> and without any patient-related complications. Of note, the reduction in ventilator intensity was associated with a decrease in bronchoalveolar inflammatory cytokines [34]. Similar results were reported in 15 patients with moderate ARDS, in which ECCO<sub>2</sub>R (blood flow of 435 mL/min) provided through a 15.5-Fr dual lumen venous catheter allowed a reduction of tidal volume from 6.2 to 4 mL/kg PBW. ECCO<sub>2</sub>R was effective in correcting pH and PaCO<sub>2</sub> but two patients required escalation to ECMO because of life-threatening hypoxemia [6].

Bein et al. conducted a randomized trial in ARDS patients comparing the effects of a 3-mL/kg PBW facilitated by AV-ECCO<sub>2</sub>R with a 6-mL/kg PBW ventilatory strategy [35]. Due to the small sample size, there was no significant difference in the primary outcome of ventilator-free days, but a post hoc analysis demonstrated shorter MV duration in patients with severe hypoxemia (PaO<sub>2</sub>/FiO<sub>2</sub> <150 mmHg) treated with ECCO<sub>2</sub>R. In addition to the possibility of further reducing tidal volume, ECCO<sub>2</sub>R could also be helpful in maintaining the conventional protective ventilation of 6 mL/kg PBW. For instance, Moss et al. [36] noticed a sustained reduction in peak inspiratory pressures following the commencement of ECCO<sub>2</sub>R in nine ARDS patients. Finally, a systematic review of 14 studies (495 patients) confirmed that ECCO<sub>2</sub>R is feasible, facilitates the use of lower tidal volume ventilation, and was associated with an increased number of ventilator-free days but not improved survival [37].

Though still largely an experimental technique, ECCO<sub>2</sub>R appears to be a promising adjunct to ventilatory management in patients with ARDS that has the potential to minimize VILI [38]. More information will be available from the results of an ongoing international

multicenter pilot study (SUPERNOVA; ClinicalTrials.gov NCT02282657) to assess the safety and feasibility of MV at 4 mL/kg PBW (facilitated by ECCO<sub>2</sub>R), and a UK multicenter RCT comparing ECCO<sub>2</sub>R to enable lower tidal volume ventilation versus standard care (REST; ClinicalTrials.gov NCT02654327).

#### **Role of ECCO<sub>2</sub>R in chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)**

Noninvasive ventilation (NIV) is the standard of care of acute hypercapnic respiratory failure (AHRF) that may fail in almost 40% of the most severe forms leading to endotracheal intubation and invasive MV (IMV) [39], which is associated with high mortality [40]. Notably, the mortality for patients who require IMV after NIV failure has been demonstrated to be higher than those who receive IMV at the beginning of treatment. As a result, ECCO<sub>2</sub>R may be a good therapeutic option for patients with AHRF to prevent failure of NIV and avoid IMV (Table 2). In fact, the use of ECCO<sub>2</sub>R in patients with AHRF may enhance the efficacy of CO<sub>2</sub> washout of NIV, therefore lowering respiratory rate, dynamic hyperinflation, and intrinsic PEEP. Importantly, by avoiding IMV and thus endotracheal intubation, it is also possible to limit the adverse effects related to analgo-sedation which include hemodynamic derangement, prolonged weaning, and a range of neurological disorders when sedation is prolonged in time. In addition, the absence of analgo-sedation allows the patients to drink, to eat, to communicate with familiars, to receive aerosolized medications, and to perform active physiotherapy. Furthermore, it has been recently demonstrated that ECCO<sub>2</sub>R, by decreasing respiratory rates, may be effective in reducing the work of breathing and in lowering CO<sub>2</sub> production of the respiratory muscles. This in turn contributes to the decrease of PaCO<sub>2</sub> [41]. As result, it may facilitate the withdrawal of IMV and may favor early endotracheal extubation.

#### **ECCO<sub>2</sub>R to obviate the need for IMV, prior to resolution of the COPD exacerbation**

Kluge et al. [42] investigated the feasibility of an AV pumpless extracorporeal lung-assist (PECLA) device in 21 COPD patients who did not respond to NIV. The use of PECLA was associated with a decrease in PaCO<sub>2</sub> levels and improved pH after 24 h, and obviated the need for intubation and IMV in 90% of treated patients. The retrospective analysis with a control group showed no significant difference in mortality at 28 days (19% with ECCO<sub>2</sub>R vs. 24% without ECCO<sub>2</sub>R) or 6 months (both groups 33%) and in the median ICU or hospital length of stay (15 vs. 30 days and 23 vs. 42 days, respectively). In the study by Burki et al. [43] 20 hypercapnic patients with COPD were treated with ECCO<sub>2</sub>R using a 15.5-Fr dual-lumen



**Table 2 Relevant clinical studies of ECCO<sub>2</sub>R in COPD patients**

Study	ECCO <sub>2</sub> R technique	Notes
Kluge et al. [42]	Femoral AV pumpless extracorporeal lung assist (PECLA); 13- to 15-Fr arterial cannula and 13- to 17-Fr venous cannula with a mean extracorporeal blood flow of 1.1 L/min	Retrospective study Chronic pulmonary disease with acute hypercapnic respiratory failure not responding to NIV 21 PECLA patients matched to historical controls with conventional IMV 19 (90%) PECLA patients did not require intubation Two major and seven minor bleeding complications during PECLA No significant difference in 28-day (24 vs. 19%, $p = 0.85$ ), 6-month mortality (83 vs. 33%), or hospital length of stay (23 vs. 42 days, $p = 0.06$ ) Significantly fewer tracheotomies in PECLA group (10 vs. 67%, $p = 0.004$ )
Burki et al. [43]	VV configuration via a 15.5-Fr single dual lumen catheter (femoral or jugular) with a mean extracorporeal blood flow of 430 mL/min	Pilot study 20 hypercapnic COPD patients received ECCO <sub>2</sub> R in three distinct groups: group 1 ( $n = 7$ ) NIV patients with high risk of IMV; group 2 ( $n = 2$ ) could not be weaned from NIV; and group 3 ( $n = 11$ ) on IMV and failed to wean IMV avoided in all patient in group 1 Both patients in group 2 weaned from NIV In group 3, three patients weaned, and IMV was reduced in two patients One patient died due to a retroperitoneal hemorrhage (during cannulation)
Abrams et al. [48]	VV configuration via a 20- to 24-Fr single dual lumen jugular catheter using lower flow on ECMO system with an extracorporeal blood flow of 1–1.7 L/min	Prospective pilot study Five patients with acute COPD exacerbations requiring IMV All subjects met primary endpoint of extubation within 72 h [median (IQR) 4 (1.5–21.5) h] Mean (SD) time to ambulation after ECCO <sub>2</sub> R initiation was 29.4 ± 12.6 h Four patients were discharged home and one underwent planned lung transplantation Only two minor bleeding complications
Del Sorbo et al. [45]	Modified continuous VV hemofiltration system with membrane lung via 14-Fr single dual lumen catheter (femoral) with an extracorporeal blood flow of 177–333 mL/min	Retrospective study Patients requiring NIV for acute hypercapnic COPD exacerbations 21 ECCO <sub>2</sub> R-NIV patients matched to historical NIV-only controls Significantly higher risk of intubation in NIV-only group (HR 0.27; 95% CI 0.07–0.98) 13 patients experienced adverse events: three had bleeding, one had vein perforation, and nine had device malfunction
Braune et al. [44]	VV configuration via a 22 or 24-Fr single dual lumen catheter (femoral or jugular) with a mean extracorporeal blood flow of 1.3 L/min	Case-control study 25 patients with acute hypercapnic respiratory failure refractory to NIV and treated with ECCO <sub>2</sub> R were compared to controls Seven ECCO <sub>2</sub> R patients were intubated because of progressive hypoxaemia and four due to ventilatory failure despite ECCO <sub>2</sub> R and NIV Nine ECCO <sub>2</sub> R patients (36%) suffered from major bleeding complications 90-day mortality rates were 28 vs. 28%

catheter allowing a mean blood flow of 430 mL/min. The authors reported an improvement in both hypercapnia and respiratory acidosis, and IMV was avoided in all nine patients receiving NIV. More recently, Del Sorbo et al. [7], reported that ECCO<sub>2</sub>R with a 14-Fr dual-lumen catheter and blood flow rates of 177–333 mL/min not only improved respiratory acidosis but also reduced the need for intubation in 25 COPD patients at high risk of NIV failure. Compared to a matched group of historical controls, the risk of being intubated and hospital mortality were significantly lower in the ECCO<sub>2</sub>R group. These results were challenged in a recent investigation by Braune et al. [44], which showed that IMV was avoided in 56% of cases treated with ECCO<sub>2</sub>R, but was associated with a higher incidence of complications. However, several differences have been highlighted between these two studies, including the inclusion of patients with relative contraindications to NIV and the unexpected high incidence of hypoxemic patients [45]. Finally, Morelli et al. [46] confirmed the efficacy of ECCO<sub>2</sub>R (with a flow rate of 250–450 mL/min through a 13-Fr dual-lumen catheter) in reducing in PaCO<sub>2</sub> in series of 30 patients with acute hypercapnic respiratory failure due to exacerbation of COPD, who refused endotracheal intubation after failing NIV. The duration of ECCO<sub>2</sub>R was 2–16 days, and it was possible to prevent endotracheal intubation in 27 patients.

#### **ECCO<sub>2</sub>R to facilitate the weaning from mechanical ventilation**

In the report from Elliot et al. [47], the addition of a pumpless ECCO<sub>2</sub>R to IMV in two patients suffering from life-threatening asthma, corrected hypercapnia and acidosis, allowed the reduction of other supportive measures and the favored the weaning from mechanical ventilation. In the study by Burki et al. [43], in the subgroup of 11 patients receiving IMV, ECCO<sub>2</sub>R allowed the weaning from the mechanical ventilator in only 3 patients. Nevertheless, although not fully weaned, another 3 patients reduced the ventilator support. By using a dual-lumen cannula (20–23 Fr) with blood flow rates of 1–1.7 L/min, Abrams et al. [48] successfully weaned and extubated five COPD patients with acute respiratory acidosis requiring IMV within 24 h, and ambulated them within 48 h of ECCO<sub>2</sub>R support. All patients survived to hospital discharge. Likewise, using a pediatric VV ECMO system (with blood flow rates of 0.9 L/min through a 19 Fr dual-lumen cannula placed in right internal jugular vein) in two adult patients with a COPD exacerbation, Roncon-Albuquerque Jr [49] reported early extubation after 72 h and patient mobilization out of bed at day 6. A retrospective data analysis from the reports of 12 patients with hypercapnic

respiratory failure confirms the efficacy of ECCO<sub>2</sub>R in correcting hypercapnia and reducing both ventilation pressures and minute volumes at median blood flow rates of 1.2–1.4 L/min. Among the investigated patients, six suffering from primarily hypercapnic lung failure due to obstructive lung disease or fibrosis were rapidly weaned from the system and survived to hospital discharge. Of note, five patients were awake and breathing spontaneously during ECCO<sub>2</sub>R [50]. Taken together, these findings support the notion that ECCO<sub>2</sub>R may be helpful in avoiding intubation during NIV and in facilitating weaning from MV.

Nevertheless, the observational nature of available data makes it impossible to understand the efficacy and safety of such strategies in these patients. Therefore, multicenter RCTs to evaluate the efficacy of ECCO<sub>2</sub>R to improve long-term outcomes in COPD patients are needed. Currently, there are a number of ongoing studies of ECCO<sub>2</sub>R in AHRF patients (ClinicalTrials.gov. NCT02260583; NCT02107222; NCT02259335).

#### **Role of ECCO<sub>2</sub>R in the bridge to lung transplantation**

It is well recognized that the patients who develop an acute deterioration of gas exchanges requiring IMV while waiting for lung transplantation are more prone to die when compared with those patients who do not require IMV [66]. The rationale of using ECCO<sub>2</sub>R in such patients lies in the possibility to avoid endotracheal intubation and IMV and thus in limiting their adverse effects (e.g., ventilator-associated pneumonia) which may preclude transplantation. In addition, by using ECCO<sub>2</sub>R, it is possible to avoid analgo-sedation, allowing the patient to maintain respiratory muscle tone and to perform active physiotherapy. Despite this rationale, reports regarding the use of ECCO<sub>2</sub>R in this particular subgroup of hypercapnic patients are still scarce. Schellongowski et al. [51] performed a retrospective study investigating 20 patients suffering from bronchiolitis obliterans syndrome, cystic fibrosis, and idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis with the indication to primary lung transplantation ( $n = 13$ ) or lung re-transplantation ( $n = 7$ ). The use of VV and pumpless AV ECCO<sub>2</sub>R was associated with an improvement in both hypercapnia and acidosis within the first 12 h of application. After a bridging period ranging from 4 to 11 days, 19 patients (95%) were successfully transplanted; hospital survival was 75%. A very recent pooled data analysis confirmed that patients supported with ECCO<sub>2</sub>R before lung retransplantation had a trend toward a better survival [52]. In the light of these findings, ECCO<sub>2</sub>R may be even helpful in thoracic surgical procedures other than lung transplantation [53]. Nevertheless, given the complexity and the challenging clinical conditions of the patients waiting for lung transplantation, the use of



**Table 3 ECCO<sub>2</sub>R-related complications**

Type of adverse event	
Patient-related events	Worsening of hypoxemia when associated to ultra-protective ventilation
	Anticoagulation-related bleeding
	Hemolysis
	Heparin-induced thrombocytopenia
Circuit placement complications	Cannulation site bleeding
	Cannulas malposition, displacement or kinking
	Vascular occlusion
	Thrombosis
	Hematoma formation
	Aneurism formation
Mechanical events	Pseudoaneurism formation
	Malfunctioning or failure of pump
	Malfunctioning or failure of oxygenator
	Malfunctioning or failure of heat exchanger
	Clots formation
	Air in circuit/air embolism

ECCO<sub>2</sub>R in these patients should only be performed in expert centers.

### ECCO<sub>2</sub>R-related complications

Although ECCO<sub>2</sub>R seems to be effective in improving gas exchanges, in mitigating hypercapnic acidosis and possibly in reducing the rate of endotracheal intubation, its use may have pulmonary and hemodynamic consequences and it can be associated to adverse events. Adverse events include patient-related events, circuit placement events and mechanical events (Table 3).

In four ARDS studies in which tidal volume was reduced from 6 to 4 and 3 mL/kg PBW [6, 34–36], the use of ECCO<sub>2</sub>R was associated with the need for higher FiO<sub>2</sub> due to compensating for the decreased mean airway pressure, low ventilation–perfusion ratio (both promote atelectasis), and a lower partial pressure of alveolar oxygen secondary to a decreased lung respiratory quotient [54–56]. In addition, higher levels of positive end-expiratory pressure (PEEP) were also required to maintain lung recruitment and functional residual capacity [6, 34–36]. Nevertheless, the need for higher PEEP to counteract the decrease of pulmonary vascular resistance induced by the reduction of hypercapnia should be considered. Of note, in the study from Fanelli et al., 40% of the patients developed life-threatening hypoxemia and required either extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) or the prone position [6]. Likewise, in the ÉCLAIR study, 28% of the patients treated with ECCO<sub>2</sub>R required endotracheal intubation due to progressive hypoxemia [44]. The

worsening of hypoxemia during ECCO<sub>2</sub>R may be due to: (1) the clinical course of the respiratory failure (evolution of infiltrates, presence of abundant respiratory secretions, atelectasis); and (2) excessive CO<sub>2</sub> removal which leads, especially during spontaneous ventilation, to the reduction of tidal volume with increased risk of atelectasis and lower partial pressure of alveolar oxygen (decreased lung respiratory quotient) [45]. The risk of worsening hypoxemia has therefore to be considered a possible drawback of ECCO<sub>2</sub>R.

Due to the low blood flow required, the newer ECCO<sub>2</sub>R systems do not negatively affect systemic hemodynamics. In this regard, it has been reported that ECCO<sub>2</sub>R decreases pulmonary hypertension and unloads RV, leading to improved RV-arterial coupling [57–59]. As both ARDS and COPD patients are at high risk of RV dysfunction, besides improving gas exchange ECCO<sub>2</sub>R may contribute to prevent acute right ventricular dysfunction [60]. None of the available reports or studies showed increased vasopressors requirements during ECCO<sub>2</sub>R. Improved myocardial performance and possibly reduced level of sedation may account for these findings. Forster et al. [61] demonstrated in ten patients that a combined ECCO<sub>2</sub>R and renal-replacement circuit decreased vasopressor requirements. Whether this decrease was mainly the effect of renal-replacement therapy in reducing systemic acidosis remains to be determined.

Major adverse events can be caused by vein and/or arterial cannulation, with increased risk depending on the choice of vascular access, and the type and the size of cannulas. Bein et al. [35] reported transient ischemia of the lower limb in one patient and ‘false’ aneurysm in other two patients after placing a 15-Fr cannula in the femoral artery. One perforation of the left iliac vein with death secondary to retroperitoneal bleeding occurred in the study of Burki et al. [43]. Retroperitoneal hematoma and vein perforation at catheter insertion have also been reported [45].

The low blood flow adopted by newer ECCO<sub>2</sub>R devices increases the risk of catheter and membrane thrombosis. Anticoagulation protocols with heparin are therefore required to maintain the ECCO<sub>2</sub>R efficiency and performance [62]. The occurrence of minor bleeding events can be considered the most frequent complication, and can be the consequence of anticoagulation or catheter insertion. Although such minor bleeding events seem not to affect the hemodynamics or outcome, they may be associated with a higher number of units of red blood cells transfused during the treatment [6, 35, 42–45]. Major bleeding episodes (bleeding episodes requiring more than two blood transfusions) were observed in patients from the larger case series [6, 42, 43, 45]. Notably, in the very recent study by Braune et al. [44], 11 major bleeding

episodes were observed in 9 ECCO<sub>2</sub>R patients (36%). Transient thrombocytopenia probably related to the use of heparin has also been noticed [36, 43, 45]. However, thrombocytopenia as well as reduction in coagulation factors could also be the consequence of the interactions between the blood components and the circuit. In addition to the blood trauma caused by the pump and membrane, the contact between blood and the artificial surfaces of the circuit results in coagulation and fibrinolytic pathway activation and a complement-mediated inflammatory response [63]. Future research should be focused on improving anticoagulation protocols and developing practice guidelines [63, 64].

Concerns about mechanical events due to thrombosis persist. Despite anticoagulation protocols, the formation of clots in the circuits often occurs and contributes to reduced membrane CO<sub>2</sub> clearance with a consequent rapid increase in PaCO<sub>2</sub>. The occurrence of membrane thrombosis has to be considered a life-threatening event and requires the prompt substitution of the circuit, changes in the ventilator settings, and endotracheal intubation in case of NIV [6, 36, 45]. To prevent clotting, particular attention should be paid to the choice of the vascular access and to detecting the kinking of catheters, as it can prevent the achievement of target blood flow rates [6]. Catheter displacement or kinking may cause pump malfunction and favors membrane clotting. Therefore, in cases of high body mass index and/or intraabdominal hypertension, subclavian or jugular vein catheterization may be preferred to the femoral veins, as it may better guarantee target blood flow rates without increasing the pressure in the circuit. Finally, episodes of intravascular hemolysis have been reported in two case series, with one requiring transfusion [6, 36].

## Conclusion

ECCO<sub>2</sub>R may be a promising adjuvant therapeutic strategy for the management of patients with severe exacerbations of COPD and for the achievement of protective or ultra-protective ventilation in patients with ARDS without life-threatening hypoxemia. However, difficulties in predicting the progression of disease at an early stage of respiratory failure may limit the use of ECCO<sub>2</sub>R in clinical practice. Accordingly, careful clinical evaluation of the patients has to be performed to choose the most appropriate ECCO<sub>2</sub>R device in terms of extracorporeal blood flow rates. Furthermore, the potential complications from ECCO<sub>2</sub>R need to be considered, particularly the balance between bleeding and clotting events, and the optimal use of anticoagulation. Given the observational nature of most of the available clinical data and differences in technical features and performances of used devices, it is difficult to understand the balance of

risks and benefits for or against ECCO<sub>2</sub>R in such patient populations. Therefore, ECCO<sub>2</sub>R should be considered an experimental technique rather than an accepted therapeutic strategy.

## Author details

<sup>1</sup> Department of Anesthesiology and Intensive Care, Policlinico Umberto 1, Sapienza University of Rome, Rome, Italy. <sup>2</sup> Interdepartmental Division of Critical Care Medicine, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada. <sup>3</sup> Extracorporeal Life Support Program, Toronto General Hospital, 585 University Avenue, PMB 11-123, Toronto, ON M5G 2N2, Canada. <sup>4</sup> Fondazione IRCCS Ca' Granda, Ospedale Maggiore Policlinico and Department of Pathophysiology and Transplantation, Università degli Studi di Milano, Milan, Italy.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge Alberto Goffi, MD (Interdepartmental Division of Critical Care Medicine, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada) for creating the figures for this manuscript. He was not compensated for this work.

## Compliance with ethical standards

## Conflicts of interest

Antonio Pesenti received funding for research and travel from Maquet Cardiovascular, and is currently on the Medical Advisory Board of Novalung and Baxter. He holds a number of patents related to CO<sub>2</sub> removal technology. All other authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Received: 28 November 2016 Accepted: 29 December 2016

Published online: 28 January 2017

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