Health and Economic Outcomes of Posterior Spinal Fusion for Children With Neuromuscular Scoliosis

Jody L. Lin, MD, MS,¹,²,³ Daniel S. Tawfik, MD, MS,⁴ Ribhav Gupta, BS,⁵ Meghan Imrie, MD,⁶ Eran Bendavid, MD, MS,⁷ Douglas K. Owens, MD, MS¹

ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVES: Neuromuscular scoliosis (NMS) can result in severe disability. Nonoperative management minimally slows scoliosis progression, but operative management with posterior spinal fusion (PSF) carries high risks of morbidity and mortality. In this study, we compare health and economic outcomes of PSF to nonoperative management for children with NMS to identify opportunities to improve care.

METHODS: We performed a cost-effectiveness analysis. Our decision analytic model included patients aged 5 to 20 years with NMS and a Cobb angle $\geq 50^\circ$, with a base case of 15-year-old patients. We estimated costs, life expectancy, quality-adjusted life-years (QALYs), and incremental cost-effectiveness from published literature and conducted sensitivity analyses on all model inputs.

RESULTS: We estimated that PSF resulted in modestly decreased discounted life expectancy (10.8 years) but longer quality-adjusted life expectancy (4.84 QALYs) than nonoperative management (11.2 years; 3.21 QALYs). PSF costs $75,400 per patient. Under base-case assumptions, PSF costs $50,100 per QALY gained. Our findings were sensitive to quality of life (QoL) and life expectancy, with PSF favored if it significantly increased QoL.

CONCLUSIONS: In patients with NMS, whether PSF is cost-effective depends strongly on the degree to which QoL improved, with larger improvements when NMS is the primary cause of debility, but limited data on QoL and life expectancy preclude a definitive assessment. Improved patient-centered outcome assessments are essential to understanding the effectiveness of NMS treatment alternatives. Because the degree to which PSF influences QoL substantially impacts health outcomes and varies by patient, clinicians should consider shared decision-making during PSF-related consultations.

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Address correspondence to Jody L. Lin, MD, MS, Division of Inpatient Medicine, Department of Pediatrics, School of Medicine, The University of Utah, 100 Mario Capecchi Drive, Salt Lake City, UT 84114. E-mail: jody.lin@hsc.utah.edu
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Pediatric hospitalists frequently comanage the care of children with neuromuscular scoliosis (NMS). Postoperative comanagement has been associated with decreased length of stay. Although less common, preoperative comanagement resulted in recommendations, including medication and nutrition changes and additional subspecialty involvement. Identifying new opportunities to improve care for children with NMS can increase the value of care pediatric hospitalists provide in surgical comanagement.

NMS is the abnormal curvature of the spine secondary to an underlying neurologic condition and affects all nonambulatory children with cerebral palsy and 50% to 75% of children with mobility limitations. Most patients with NMS have cerebral palsy, a disorder of spinal cord development, or muscular dystrophy, and children with NMS frequently have additional comorbidities with lifelong functional impairment. Scoliosis progression extends beyond skeletal maturity in nonambulatory patients, with 50% of children with severe cerebral palsy progressing to moderate-to-severe scoliosis. NMS progression often results in chronic pain, mobility impairment, and cardiorespiratory compromise.

Treatment options for NMS include nonoperative and operative management. Nonoperative management, including bracing and physical therapy, frequently fails to halt curve progression. Operative management is reserved for severe curvatures of a Cobb angle $\geq 50^\circ$ or for patients with failed nonoperative therapy. The primary benefit of operative management is parent report of improved health-related quality of life (HRQOL) in pain control, mobility, and feeding. However, objective assessments of physical function performed by physical therapists revealed no meaningful improvement in function above the preoperative baseline 12 months after surgery. Although operative management has high costs and high complication rates, the frequency with which it is performed has rapidly increased over the past decade, likely influenced by the lack of alternative definitive treatment options.

Posterior spinal fusion (PSF) is the most common operative management approach for NMS and uses implantable rods that mechanically straighten the affected portion of the spine, resulting in the subsequent fusion of the vertebrae over time. PSF in NMS frequently involves long portions of the spine, from the upper thoracic to the lower lumbar vertebrae or pelvis. Although PSF produces marked improvements in the degree of spine curvature, its effects on quality of life (QOL) and health outcomes remain poorly understood. Furthermore, children with NMS often have comorbidities that increase their risk of perioperative and postoperative complications (including hemorrhage, respiratory failure, surgical site infection, and death) and contribute to higher costs.

Trade-offs between complication rates and cost with potential gains in QOL and health make the decision for PSF complicated to navigate. Among pediatric hospitalists in surgical comanagement programs, a greater understanding of the factors that affect outcomes for children with NMS can help identify opportunities to improve perioperative management of PSF. Our objectives in this cost-effectiveness study were to assess the health and economic outcomes of operative and nonoperative management of children with NMS and to assess the clinical characteristics of children with NMS that could help guide treatment selection from the perspective of the health care system.

**METHODS**

**Model Design, Treatments, Health States, and Target Population**

We performed a cost-effectiveness analysis using a simple decision tree to compare 2 treatment strategies for patients with NMS: operative management with PSF and nonoperative management. The key health states and transitions are captured in Fig 1. In our base-case analysis, we assumed no crossover between treatment groups. A base-case analysis applies to the model with the most likely variable estimates and assumptions based on the literature. Perioperative complications included major complications, such as intraoperative shock and hemorrhage and prolonged intubation. Those who survived the perioperative period transitioned to 1 of 3 postoperative health states: no postoperative complications, a surgical site infection, or a noninfectious, implant-related complication requiring surgical site reoperation. Those with surgical site infection received treatment with long-term antibiotics alone or with reoperation. We excluded other complications, such as gastrointestinal complications, which were less well described. Patients could transition to death from each health state.

Our base-case analysis tracks a simulated cohort of 15-year-old patients with NMS and a Cobb angle of $\geq 50^\circ$. We excluded children who underwent combined anterior spinal fusion and PSF and those with muscular dystrophy because NMS progression in muscular dystrophy may be altered by corticosteroids, which are not viable treatment options for most children with NMS.

**RESULTS**

Base-case parameters, ranges of values, and corresponding data sources are listed in Table 1. Parameter estimates were derived from literature about all populations of children undergoing NMS when available and otherwise from the subpopulation of children with NMS and cerebral palsy, the most prevalent comorbid condition associated with NMS. We discounted costs and outcomes by 3% annually and adjusted all costs to 2018 prices using the Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator. We used a lifetime time horizon because NMS persists over time, and estimated values are from the health care system perspective. We calculated incremental costs per quality-adjusted life-year (QALY) (combines

**FIGURE 1** Health transition model. Death can occur from any state.
longevity and QoL into a single measure by multiplying the duration of time in 1 health state by indicating QoL on a scale of 0 (death) to 1 (perfect health); e.g., 1 year of life × QoL of 0.5 utility = 0.5 QALY; see Table 2 for definitions), reported as the incremental cost-effectiveness ratio (ICER) (additional cost to gain 1 additional QALY), and compared our findings against the traditional cost-effectiveness threshold of $50,000 per QALY, with ICERs <$50,000 per QALY considered more cost-effective.23,24

Model construction and analyses were performed by using TreeAge Pro 2018 (TreeAge Software, Inc, Williamstown, MA) and Microsoft Excel. Selection of model inputs is detailed below.

Life Expectancy

We based the life expectancy of our base-case analysis on published literature on postoperative life expectancy in children with cerebral palsy and NMS after spinal fusion.25 We estimated life expectancy to be 26.2 years. However, other sources in the literature had notably different projections of life expectancy, which we used in our sensitivity analyses.26 In our base-case analysis, we assumed that uncomplicated PSF does not significantly change life expectancy because of inconclusive data on PSF’s effect on preventing pneumonia and respiratory failure, the leading cause of death in children with neurologic impairment.27–29

HRQOL

To assess the effect of PSF on patients’ QoL, we used utility-based estimates of QoL based on the EuroQol 5 dimensions, which combine measures of health on 5 dimensions (mobility, self-care, usual activities, pain and/or discomfort, and anxiety and/or depression) into a composite scale anchored at 0 (death) and 1 (full health).30 For studies reporting HRQOL with alternative measures such as the Caregiver Priorities and Child Health Index of Life with Disabilities, we mapped results to the EuroQol 5 dimensions to calculate QoL for each health state.31–35 Because of the markedly lower HRQOL for patients who had complications from operative management, we included these lower values in sensitivity analyses.33 We assumed that HRQOL is altered by surgical intervention but does not otherwise significantly change over time because cerebral palsy, the most prevalent comorbidity associated with NMS, is a nonprogressive medical condition.

Adverse Events

Perioperative complications for the operative management group included intraoperative hemorrhage, pulmonary complications, and death.20 Intraoperative hemorrhage included hemodynamic instability, defined as requiring multiple blood transfusions, hypotension, vasopressor support, and associated prolonged ICU monitoring beyond 24 hours postoperatively.20 Pulmonary complications included prolonged intubation beyond 24 hours, reintubation, the need for positive pressure support (above baseline) beyond 48 hours, and associated prolonged ICU monitoring.19

Postoperative complications for the operative management group included surgical site infections and implant-related complications.20 Surgical site infections included prolonged antibiotic treatment and surgical site reoperation. Implant-related complications included malpositioning, malfunction, and other noninfectious, implant-related issues that required reoperation. We estimated transition probabilities for health states and decreases in life expectancy associated with each complication from published literature.19,20,36 We assumed the risk of death during reoperation to be the same as for the initial operation.

Costs

We calculated the baseline annual medical costs of caring for a child with NMS in operative and nonoperative management groups from published estimates of annual care for children with cerebral palsy with an intellectual disability age of 14 to 17 years old from the MarketScan Multi-State Medicaid database.21 Baseline costs included inpatient admissions, outpatient encounters, and medications. We selected this subgroup of children with cerebral palsy, which had the highest anticipated expenditures, because we felt they were reflective of the likely higher baseline costs of care for children with NMS who undergo PSF, who have a high prevalence of comorbid conditions: 95.6% have ≥1 comorbidity condition, and 58.5% have ≥4 comorbidity conditions.27–29

Although we were unable to get annual baseline cost estimates for privately insured patients, the majority of children with NMS undergoing spinal fusion are covered exclusively or in part by Medicaid.27 We assumed nonoperative management modalities, including bracing and physical therapy, were included in the baseline costs of care for this population. Because of the overall heterogeneity of health conditions in children with NMS, we included the annual cost estimates from children with cerebral palsy without intellectual disability in our sensitivity analyses.

We calculated the costs of operative management from weighted averages of published costs for PSF that included direct, indirect, variable, and fixed costs of individual encounters for NMS surgery from 2 distinct institutions.14,15 We used 1 of these sources to estimate the costs of perioperative complications.19 We estimated the costs for treatment of surgical site infections with antibiotics and reoperation from a cost-savings analysis of strategies to prevent surgical site infection in spinal fusion in adults with posterior spinal surgery involving multilevel fusions with hardware because pediatric sources were unavailable.34 Costs were based on reimbursement received by the hospital and did not include costs of the new implant (if placed) or physician fees.

Sensitivity Analyses

Sensitivity analyses systematically evaluate the impact of uncertainty in estimates of model variables and of assumptions in the models.24 When small changes in variable estimates or changes to assumptions result in large changes in the ICER, and thus cost-effectiveness of a treatment, they are important items to consider during decision-making. We tested all model variables with values across the full range of published values or ±15% of the
base-case parameter when no wider range was available, as shown in Table 1. Our 2-way sensitivity analyses focused on evaluating the effects of HRQOL and life expectancy because of the uncertainty in our estimates of these values and the heterogeneity of comorbid conditions that can significantly affect a child’s HRQOL and life expectancy. We also tested our assumptions that (1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Base-Case Value, Point Estimate (Range)a</th>
<th>Parameter Distributionb</th>
<th>Source(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PSF risks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relative risk, mean</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perioperative death</td>
<td>0.003 (0–0.01)</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>Basques et al51; Tsirikos et al52; Asher et al53; Ersberg and Gerdhem33; Reames et al6</td>
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<td>Perioperative complication</td>
<td>0.181 (0.04–0.28)</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>Ersberg and Gerdhem55; Sharma et al18; Reames et al8</td>
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<td>Death after perioperative complication</td>
<td>0.0054 (0–0.01)</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>Reames et al8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reoperation</td>
<td>0.072 (0–0.13)</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>McLeod et al52; Rappaport et al15; Asher et al56</td>
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<tr>
<td>Surgical site infection</td>
<td>0.089 (0.03–0.24)</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>Cahill et al53; Szöke et al54; Smith et al56; Sharma et al15; Ramo et al57; Reames et al4; Mackenzie et al15; Martin et al18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reoperation for surgical site infection</td>
<td>0.580 (0–0.75)</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>McLeod et al52; Ramo et al18</td>
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<td>Perioperative death with reoperation</td>
<td>0.003 (0–0.01)</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>Basques et al51; Tsirikos et al52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costs</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Health care and nonhealth care costs, 2018 US dollars</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSF</td>
<td>75 367 (46 980–107 970)</td>
<td>γ</td>
<td>Diefenbach et al14; Rappaport et al15; Berry et al6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perioperative complication, additional cost</td>
<td>29 277 (0–58 455)</td>
<td>γ</td>
<td>Diefenbach et al14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reoperationc</td>
<td>188 973 (58 574–555 163)</td>
<td>γ</td>
<td>Emohare et al38</td>
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<td>Medical care, yearly (all groups)d,e</td>
<td>52 923 (16 721–172 229)</td>
<td>γ</td>
<td>Kancheria et al17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Utility wt and life expectancies</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSF</td>
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<tr>
<td>Utility wt</td>
<td>0.63 (0.43–0.79)</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>Erasberg and Gerdhem55; Bohtz et al51; Watanabe et al14; Sewell et al52; DiFazio et al35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Life expectancy, y</td>
<td>11.2 (10.5–11.9)</td>
<td>γ</td>
<td>Tsirikos et al25</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSF with reoperation</td>
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<td>Utility wt</td>
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<td>Life expectancy, y</td>
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<td>Tsirikos et al25; Asher et al56</td>
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<td>PSF with reoperation and surgical site infection</td>
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<td>Utility wt</td>
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<td>β</td>
<td>Erasberg and Gerdhem55; Bohtz et al51; Watanabe et al14</td>
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<td>Life expectancy, y</td>
<td>8.96 (8.4–9.5)</td>
<td>γ</td>
<td>Tsirikos et al25; Asher et al56</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSF with medically managed surgical site infection</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utility wt</td>
<td>0.51 (0.36–0.68)</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>Erasberg and Gerdhem55; Bohtz et al51; Watanabe et al14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life expectancy, y</td>
<td>9.33 (8.8–9.9)</td>
<td>γ</td>
<td>Tsirikos et al25; Asher et al56</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nonoperative scoliosis management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Utility wt</td>
<td>0.40 (0.18–0.61)</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>Erasberg and Gerdhem55; Bohtz et al51; Watanabe et al14; Sewell12; DiFazio et al15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life expectancy, y</td>
<td>11.2 (11.2–33.5)</td>
<td>γ</td>
<td>Tsirikos et al25; Strauss et al12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Upper and lower bounds used in sensitivity analyses were based on the widest range of reported values unless otherwise noted.
b β is a continuous statistical distribution bounded between 0 and 1. y is a continuous statistical distribution with a lower bound value of 0.
c Discounted 3% yearly on the basis of mean time to reoperation.
d Discounted 3% yearly on the basis of life expectancy.
e Value shown is based on the life expectancy of the nonoperative group.
HRQOL does not change over time, accounting for children who experience gradual clinical decline, and (2) there was no crossover between treatment groups because clinical practice suggests nonoperative management may delay but not replace operative management.

RESULTS

Base-Case Analysis

We estimated discounted life expectancy for the operative management group to be 10.9 years and for the nonoperative management group to be 11.2 years. The modestly shorter life expectancy was attributed to the additional mortality associated with the operation, intraoperative complications, and postoperative complications. On the basis of our review of the literature, we estimated the QoL to be 0.61 for the operative management group and 0.37 for the nonoperative management group, indicating that QoL is substantially improved with operative management (on a scale of 0 [death] to 1 [perfect health]). On the basis of discounted life expectancy and QoL, we estimated the QALYs to be 4.84 for the operative management group and 3.21 for the nonoperative management group. The longer quality-adjusted life expectancy with operative management compared with nonoperative management. Table 3 summarizes these results. Figure 2 shows the cost-effectiveness frontier for the analysis, which plots costs against QALYs to demonstrate which treatment is associated with the lowest cost and which is associated with the highest QALYs.

Sensitivity Analysis

We conducted extensive sensitivity analyses, assessing the impact of uncertainty from all model inputs. The evidence about the effect of surgery on QoL is mixed, and therefore, we conducted sensitivity analyses on the improvement of QoL between operative and nonoperative management. The cost-effectiveness of operative management depends on the small differences in the QoL between nonoperative and operative management, as shown in Fig 3. In our base-case analysis, we estimated the QoL after operative management to be 0.61 and after nonoperative management to be 0.37, indicating an improvement in the QoL of 0.24, which is substantial. As the difference in the QoL between operative and nonoperative management decreases, the cost-effectiveness of operative management becomes markedly less favorable, as seen in Fig 3.

In 1-way sensitivity analyses, our findings proved to be robust to uncertainty among all probability variables at a willingness-to-pay threshold of $50,000 per QALY, except when probability of perioperative death exceeded 0.004, as seen in Supplemental Fig 4. Our findings were also sensitive to variations in annual baseline care costs, with operative management preferred when costs exceeded $53,192, as seen in Supplemental Fig 5, and variations in additional life expectancy, with operative management preferred when additional life expectancy exceeded 11.2 years, as seen in Supplemental Fig 6.

When evaluating the relationship between HRQOL and life expectancy, operative management is preferred for lower HRQOL but longer life expectancy, as seen in our 2-way sensitivity analysis for the nonoperative group in Supplemental Fig 7. Our model was not sensitive to the decline in HRQOL of 15% per year.

We also simulated crossover from nonoperative to operative management because clinical practice suggests that nonoperative management may delay but not replace operative management. We used a Markov model and assumed that 50% of patients undergo operative management immediately and patients crossover at 5% per year, with a cycle length of 1 month and a half-cycle correction. We estimated the life expectancy of the crossover group to be 11 years and QALYs to be 4.31, as seen in Table 3. Crossover management was more costly and less effective than operative management, as seen in Fig 2. Our findings were robust to 1-way sensitivity analyses of all variables, including the initial proportion of patients undergoing operative management and rate of crossover from nonoperative to operative management.

DISCUSSION

Children who are potential candidates for PSF often have medical complexity that may affect the length and QoL and make predictions about clinical trajectory
One-way sensitivity analysis of FIGURE 3
difficult. Our results suggest (by using the
traditional cost-effectiveness threshold of
$50,000 per QALY gained) that from the
health care system perspective, PSF is
marginally not cost-effective. However, our
estimates were highly sensitive to the
degree to which PSF improves QoL,
indicating that the cost-effectiveness of PSF
depends on how children with NMS and
their parents value the gains in QoL
associated with PSF.

The decision to undergo PSF depends
heavily on the balance between length of life
and QoL. We observed that PSF appears
more cost-effective for children with NMS
when children have larger anticipated
improvements in QoL and longer anticipated
survival times, suggesting children without
medical complexity or life-shortening
conditions are better candidates for
operative management. On the basis of our
results, for children with medical complexity
or with life-shortening conditions, PSF could
trade length of life for QoL, but if NMS is the
key factor in lowering QoL, PSF could result in
marked improvements for the child’s QoL and
would be highly cost-effective. Although the
expense of PSF surgery is a widely discussed
consideration for PSF, we found that surgical
costs minimally impact the cost-effectiveness
of PSF. The high annual baseline care costs
of children with NMS have bigger effects on
lifetime medical costs than PSF, likely limiting
the effect of PSF costs on our results.

Similarly, in sensitivity analyses, high
surgical-complication rates minimally
impacted the cost-effectiveness of PSF
because their impact was short lived except
for death. However, complications should be
viewed from a safety perspective, which is
not emphasized in cost-effectiveness.

Our results identify additional opportunities
for pediatric hospitalists in surgical
comanagement roles to improve quality and
health outcomes in PSF. Pediatric hospitalist
comanagement is associated with timely
attention to preoperative clearance needs
and decreased length of stay.1,2,15,17,41

Through preoperative comanagement,
pediatric hospitalists can help support
families in decision-making and identify
comorbidities that may affect gains in
HRQOL. On the basis of our results, the
degree to which PSF influences HRQOL
substantially impacts health outcomes and
also varies by patient. Therefore, future
work should include elucidating HRQOL for
children with NMS and their families
through shared decision-making, which
helps align decisions with individual
preferences and values when there is no
clear best option.42–44 Because of medical
complexity, children with NMS may have
increased risk of low-quality shared
decision-making.31,45 Hospitalists may also
be well suited to proactively identify those
children with NMS admitted for other
conditions who may benefit from timely
orthopedic consultation for PSF. For
example, children with severe NMS may be
repeatedly hospitalized for impaired lung
function or pneumonia or be noted to have
poor wheelchair fit during discharge
planning. These symptoms could indicate
that a timely referral to orthopedic surgery
is needed.

The potential for improvement in HRQOL is a
central consideration when discussing
operative management of NMS. Gains in
discounted HRQOL with operative
management of $0.17 resulted in a more
favorable cost-effectiveness ratio for
operative management. This sizeable
change in QoL is plausible and is analogous
to a change in adults with osteoarthritis of
the hip before versus after total hip
arthroplasty.46–48 The main contributors to
QoL differences included parent and
provider report of improved pain, mobility,
and feeding tolerance from operative
management.

If a child’s HRQOL is primarily impacted by
these contributors, PSF could significantly
improve HRQOL. However, children with NMS
may have overall low HRQOL because of
multiple comorbidities. NMS surgery may
do not significantly improve HRQOL because it
does not address all the comorbidities that
contribute to low HRQOL. Decision-making
for NMS treatment should include
assessment of the determinants of HRQOL
for the child and discussion about the
degree to which PSF influences HRQOL.

Future research that longitudinally and
prospectively evaluates HRQOL in children
with NMS who receive operative or
nonoperative management could enable the
development of clinical-decision support
tools to help identify patients who may
benefit the most from PSF.

Our study has several key limitations. Our
analysis was limited by the quality of
published data describing HRQOL and gains
in HRQOL from operative management. Thus,
we were unable to stratify our population
on the basis of functional status.
Furthermore, QoL assessments in this
population are often indirect, provided
by parents and caregivers, because
developmental delay in many children with
NMS precludes direct assessment. Indirect
HRQOL assessments introduce additional
uncertainty from possible caregiver bias. In
previous studies comparing proxy QoL
assessments by parents and children of the
same developmental age as the child,
parents provided more optimistic estimates
of QoL than children.46 Another limitation is
insufficient published data on long-term

FIGURE 2 Cost-effectiveness frontier of PSF
compared with nonoperative management for
children with NMS (base case).

FIGURE 3 One-way sensitivity analysis of
differences in HRQOL utility weight
between operative and nonoperative management.
outcomes of NMS, including life expectancy. Children with NMS frequently have comorbidities that impact their individual risk for PSF. However, our findings proved to be robust to variation in probabilities of surgical complications, suggesting that individual risk factors do not drive cost-effectiveness of operative management. Clinically, the long-term life trajectory of children with comorbid conditions is highly unpredictable, and even strong estimates of life expectancy in our model would not meaningfully inform counseling for NMS treatment selection.

CONCLUSIONS

Our analysis indicates that the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of PSF depends strongly on the degree to which it improves QoL. If PSF results in substantial gains in QoL without substantial increased mortality, the procedure could provide important gains in quality-adjusted survival at a good value. However, gaps in empirical evidence about the effect of PSF on QoL and survival limit our ability to make a definitive assessment about its cost-effectiveness. Prospective and controlled evaluation with objective quantification of HRQOL and clinical outcomes is needed across a longer time span. In the face of this uncertainty about outcomes, a better understanding of patient and caregiver preferences and values may facilitate higher-quality, ethical decision-making and care concordant with their preferences and values.43,50 Our analysis suggests these preferences and values should be a primary consideration in NMS treatment decisions.

REFERENCES


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