

# **The Effects of Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy on Oxidative Stress, and Inflammation Markers, and Symptoms in Autistic Children with Autism: an Open-label Pilot Study**

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# Abstract

## Background

Recently, there has been an increase in the use of hyperbaric oxygen therapy (HBOT) as a treatment for autistic individuals. A review of the literature, however, yields no prospective studies on the use of HBOT for this condition. It is well documented that autism is characterized by increased oxidative stress. Under certain conditions, HBOT can increase oxidative stress. In response to these facts, autistic children treated with HBOT at commonly used pressures and oxygen concentrations were evaluated for changes in markers of oxidative stress. Some autistic individuals also demonstrate evidence of inflammation. HBOT is reported to diminish inflammation; therefore, the effect of HBOT on an inflammatory marker in this population was examined. The safety and clinical effects of HBOT in this vulnerable population were also evaluated.

## Methods

Eighteen autistic children underwent 40 hyperbaric sessions of 45 minutes duration each at either 1.5 atmospheres (atm) and 100% oxygen, or 1.3 atm and 24% oxygen. Fasting blood was drawn before and after the 40 treatments for measurements of C-reactive protein (CRP) and markers of oxidative stress, including plasma oxidized glutathione (GSSG). Changes in clinical symptoms, as rated by parents, were also collected.

## Results

There was no statistically significant change in mean plasma GSSG levels with the use of 40 HBOT sessions at either 1.3 atm or 1.5 atm. These results indicate that intracellular oxidative stress did not appreciably worsen. There was a trend towards improvement in mean CRP improved in both groups; the largest improvements were observed in those children with initially very elevated CRP. Parents noted some clinical improvements in both groups and no major adverse events were seen.

## Conclusions

In this prospective open-label pilot study of 18 autistic children, HBOT at the pressures and oxygen concentrations used did not appreciably worsen intracellular oxidative stress. In addition, HBOT decreased CRP levels, improved some clinical symptoms, and was well tolerated. Definitive statements regarding the efficacy of HBOT for the treatment of children with autism must await results from future double-blind, controlled trials. Further evaluation of the effects of HBOT on clinical symptoms in autistic children with a larger, double-blind, randomized controlled study is warranted. Trial Registration: clinicaltrials.gov NCT00324909

Keywords: autism; autistic spectrum disorders; hyperbaric oxygen therapy; cerebral

hypoperfusion; inflammation; neuroinflammation; oxidative stress; glutathione; C-reactive protein

## Background

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder currently affecting as many as 1 out of 150 individuals in the United States [1]. Autism is characterized by impairments in social interaction, difficulty with communication, and restrictive and repetitive behaviors [2]. Autism traditionally is considered a “static” neurological disorder [3] and improvements in core autistic features are not common [4,5]. Furthermore, three rigorously performed epidemiological studies demonstrate that the prevalence of autism has increased in recent years [6-8]. These facts might explain why parents of autistic children are more likely to seek alternative and off-label medical therapies than parents of neurotypical children in the general population [9]. One alternative off-label therapy that has recently increased in popularity is hyperbaric oxygen therapy (HBOT). Traditionally, HBOT involves inhaling 100% oxygen at a pressure greater than one atmosphere (atm) in a pressurized chamber [10].

Most typical indications for HBOT involve the use of hyperbaric pressures above 2.0 atm. Higher pressures are generally required to treat conditions such as carbon monoxide poisoning and to improve wound healing [10,11]. However, in some studies, the use of oxygen does appear to enhance neurological function. For instance, in a double-blind, placebo-controlled, cross-over study, oxygen administration in healthy young adults, when compared to room air, was demonstrated to enhance cognitive performance, including improved performance on attention, reaction times, and word recall [12]. Additionally, HBOT at 2.5 atm and 100% oxygen in elderly patients, when compared to a control group, was shown to improve cognitive function, including memory [13]. Some investigators have also used HBOT to treat certain neurological disorders, including chronic and traumatic brain injury, and clinical improvements in these patients have been observed [14-18]. HBOT, at lower hyperbaric pressures (1.5 atm or

less), has also been used ~~However,~~ in ~~several~~ other chronic neurological conditions ~~some~~ ~~investigators have begun using lower hyperbaric pressures (1.5 atm or less)~~ with clinical improvements noted [19, 20, 21 ~~12-14~~]; these include conditions such as fetal alcohol syndrome [22 ~~15~~] and cerebral palsy [23-27 ~~16-19~~]. Based upon these studies, some physicians have ~~applied~~ ~~been applying~~ similar lower hyperbaric pressures of 1.3 to 1.5 atm in autistic individuals, with oxygen concentrations ranging from 21% to 100% [28, 29 ~~20,21~~].

HBOT for ~~neurotypical~~ children is generally regarded as safe, even at pressures of 2.0 atm for 2 hours per day [30 ~~22~~]. However, to our knowledge, the safety of HBOT for autistic children has not been previously studied; a review of MEDLINE indicates that there are no prospective studies on the use of HBOT for autism. Yet, there are anecdotal reports of clinical improvements in autistic children with hyperbaric therapy that have been reported by some physicians. For instance, Heuser et al. treated a four year old child with autism using hyperbaric therapy at 1.3 atm and 24% oxygen and reported “striking improvement in behavior including memory and cognitive functions” after only ten sessions. This child also had marked improvement of cerebral hypoperfusion as measured by pre-hyperbaric and post-hyperbaric Single Photon Emission Computed Tomography (SPECT) scans [28 ~~20~~]. Another case series suggested that hyperbaric therapy at 1.3 atm led to clinical improvements in six autistic children [29 ~~21~~].

Review of the pathophysiology found in some autistic individuals in conjunction with the mechanisms of action of HBOT leads to the speculation that HBOT might produce clinical improvements in autistic individuals [31 ~~23~~]. Several studies indicate that some autistic individuals manifest cerebral hypoperfusion [32-34 ~~24-26~~], neuroinflammation [35-37 ~~27-29~~], and gastrointestinal inflammation [38, 39 ~~30,31~~]. HBOT might ameliorate some of these

problems by improving cerebral hypoperfusion [21,28,40,41 ~~14,20,32,33~~], and by decreasing neuroinflammation and gastrointestinal inflammation [42-47 ~~34-39~~]. However, no prospective studies have examined the role of HBOT on inflammation and cerebral hypoperfusion in autistic individuals.

Furthermore, concerns exist that HBOT might increase oxidative stress via the production of reactive oxygen species [48 ~~40~~]. These concerns are especially relevant because some autistic children possess evidence of increased oxidative stress [49 ~~41~~] including lower serum glutathione levels [50, 51 ~~42,43~~], and decreased activities of antioxidant enzymes including superoxide dismutase (SOD) and glutathione peroxidase [52 ~~44~~], catalase [53 ~~45~~], and paraoxonase, an enzyme that prevents lipid oxidation and also inactivates organophosphate toxins in humans [54 ~~46~~]. Some autistic children also have evidence of increased lipid peroxidation [53,55,56 ~~45,47,48~~]; this includes increased malondialdehyde which is a marker of oxidative stress and lipid peroxidation [57 ~~49~~]. A review of the literature indicates that oxidative stress can occur with HBOT but appears to be less of a concern at hyperbaric pressures under 2.0 atm [58 ~~50~~]. In fact, with long-term and repeated administration, HBOT below 2.0 atm can actually decrease oxidative stress [59-61 ~~51-53~~] by reducing lipid peroxidation [62 ~~54~~], and by up-regulating the activity of antioxidant enzymes including SOD [60,63 ~~52,55~~], glutathione peroxidase [64 ~~56~~], catalase [65 ~~57~~], and paraoxonase [62,66 ~~54,58~~]. Furthermore, at the pressures examined in this current study (1.3 to 1.5 atm), a search of the literature failed to identify any studies indicating that oxidative stress worsened with HBOT.

Alternatively, some evidence suggests that HBOT could actually alleviate oxidative stress in autistic children. For example, halving oxygen concentrations in normal healthy volunteers results in relative hypoxia and actually increases oxidative stress [67]. Furthermore,

there are several studies that demonstrate evidence of cerebral hypoxia, as measured by a reduction in brain Bcl-2 and an increase in brain p53, among some autistic individuals [68-70]. Elevated p53 is induced by hypoxia [71] and a decrease in Bcl-2 is associated with increased apoptosis provoked by hypoxia [72]. Therefore, in theory, improving hypoxic areas in the autistic brain might decrease oxidative stress. However, the effects of HBOT on oxidative stress in autistic individuals are unknown. To our knowledge, there have been no studies performed which examine the role of HBOT on oxidative stress in autistic children.

This current study examined hyperbaric therapy at the low and high ends of the ranges of hyperbaric pressure and oxygen concentrations commonly employed in autistic individuals: 1.3 atm and 24% oxygen [28 29], and 1.5 atm and 100% oxygen. This study had several objectives. First, since increased oxidative stress is found in some autistic children, the effects of HBOT on oxidative stress markers before and after 40 hyperbaric treatments were measured. Second, evidence of increased inflammation is found in many autistic individuals. HBOT is also known to have anti-inflammatory effects; therefore, the impact of HBOT on an inflammatory marker (C-reactive protein) were measured. Third, since the efficacy of HBOT in autism has not been previously evaluated, this open-label pilot study examined the changes in clinical symptoms, as rated by parents or caregivers, after treatment with HBOT. Finally, the safety of HBOT, used at 1.3 and 1.5 atm, was evaluated in autistic children.

## Methods

### Patients

Eighteen children, 4 girls and 14 boys, ages ranging 3 to 16 years, were assessed for participation and enrolled in the study. Six children were non-randomly assigned to 1.5 atm and

100% oxygen, and the remaining children were **non-randomly** assigned to 1.3 atm and 24% oxygen. All participants were diagnosed with autistic disorder from an independent psychologist, neurologist, psychiatrist, or developmental pediatrician and met the DSM IV criteria for autistic disorder [2]. Children with a diagnosis of Pervasive Developmental Disorder—Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS) or Asperger Syndrome were excluded from this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the parents and, when possible, the child. The study and protocol were approved by the Liberty Institutional Review Board. Baseline Childhood Autism Rating Scale (CARS) scores were obtained to determine autism severity; degrees of autism were similar in both groups (see Table 1). During the study period, children were not allowed to begin any new therapies or stop any current therapies, including medications and supplements. The children in this study were recruited from two practices (DAR and EM) in which antioxidant use and treatments to raise glutathione levels are common therapies. Because of this, many of the children were already taking supplements before the study began, such as folic acid or methylcobalamin (see Table 1). No significant differences in supplement usage, age, or initial CARS score were found between the children in the 1.5 atm group as compared to the 1.3 atm group.

<<<Insert Table 1 here>>>

### **Hyperbaric treatment protocol at 1.3 atm and 24% oxygen**

Twelve children (11 boys and 1 girl, **average mean** age  $6.2 \pm 4.0$  years, range 3-16 years) were assigned to separately receive hyperbaric therapy at approximately 1.3 atm and 24% oxygen in a monoplace hyperbaric chamber. Each child entered the chamber with a parent or other caregiver. Compression time to obtain a pressure of 1.3 atm was approximately 10 minutes. During this time the children equilibrated their middle ears by swallowing liquid,

eating, or yawning. Oxygen at 10 liters per minute from an oxygen concentrator was mixed with room air and pumped into the chamber. This resulted in a final chamber oxygen concentration of approximately 24% as measured by an oxygen monitor. The child was monitored during the entire treatment cycle. After 45 minutes of 24% oxygen at 1.3 atm, the chamber was decompressed over approximately 10 minutes. This therapy was given 45 minutes daily for an average of 4.6 times per week over an average of a 9.0 week period, for a total of 40 treatments per child.

### **Hyperbaric treatment protocol at 1.5 atm and 100% oxygen**

Six children (3 boys and 3 girls, mean age  $7.7 \pm 4.5$  years, range 3-16 years) were assigned to separately receive hyperbaric therapy at 1.5 atm and 100% oxygen in a monoplace hyperbaric chamber. Each child entered the chamber with a parent or other caregiver. Compression time to obtain a pressure of 1.5 atm was approximately 15 minutes. During this time, the children equilibrated their middle ears by swallowing liquid, eating, or yawning. Each child was fitted with a rubber-neck collar and clear plastic hood through which 100% oxygen was delivered. The rubber-neck collar was applied before getting into the chamber and the plastic hood was attached after a pressure of 1.5 atm was attained. Two hoses, one for oxygen input and one for oxygen exit, were then attached to the hood. The oxygen was then turned on and entered the hood through one hose and exited through the second hose and was vented to outside the chamber. The chamber was pressurized with room air and the oxygen concentration of the chamber remained below 23% during the course of the treatment. The child was monitored during the entire treatment cycle. After 45 minutes of 100% oxygen at 1.5 atm, the oxygen was turned off, the hood was removed, and the chamber was decompressed over

approximately 10 minutes. This therapy was given 45 minutes daily for an average of 4.7 times per week over an average of an 8.8 week period, for a total of 40 treatments per child.

### **Blood for C-reactive protein and oxidative stress markers**

Immediately prior to the first hyperbaric treatment and within 24 hours of finishing the 40<sup>th</sup> (last) hyperbaric treatment, blood specimens for measuring C-reactive protein (CRP) and oxidative stress profiles were drawn. The oxidative stress profiles were obtained and analyzed by SJJ and SM in a blinded fashion according to procedures previously described [50,51 42,43]. The CRPs were sent to LabCorp for analysis. The technicians at LabCorp were blinded to the fact that any of the submitted samples were for use in this study, and the same laboratory instrumentation and technique was used to measure the before and after CRP samples.

### **Clinical outcome measures**

Pre-treatment scores and post-treatment scores were calculated for each child using the Aberrant Behavior Checklist—Community (ABC-C), Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS), and the Autism Treatment Evaluation Checklist (ATEC). To determine outcomes, a parent or other caretaker filled out each scale prior to treatment, and after 10, 20, 30, and 40 hyperbaric sessions.

The ABC-C is a 58-item questionnaire that assesses communication, reciprocal social interaction, play, and stereotyped behaviors [73 59]. It is used to evaluate the effects of medications and other therapeutic interventions and is scored from 0 (“not at all a problem”) to 3 (“problem is severe in degree”). The ABC-C is widely and successfully used in clinical trials of autistic individuals [74,75 60,61]. For this study, in addition to scores in 5 subsets (irritability, lethargy, stereotypy, hyperactivity, and inappropriate speech), an overall score was also calculated.

The SRS is a recently validated test of interpersonal behavior, communication, and stereotypical traits in autism [76 62]. It consists of ~~five~~ ~~four~~ subscales: social awareness, social cognition, social communication, social motivation, and autistic mannerisms. The SRS measures the degree of social impairments in autistic children and is suitable for assessing treatment outcomes. In this study, a total score was obtained and raw scores were calculated for each subscale.

The ATEC is a questionnaire that was developed by the Autism Research Institute to evaluate treatment efficacy in autistic individuals. It consists of four subscales labeled: Speech/Language/ Communication, Sociability, Sensory/Cognitive Awareness, and Health/Physical/Behavior. The scores are weighted according to the response and the corresponding subscale. The higher the subscale and total scores, the more impaired the subject. A split-half reliability analysis on 1,358 checklists indicated high internal consistency among the questions within each subscale [77 63]. ATEC is used in some studies as an outcome measure [78,79 64,65]. It is designed to allow parents and physicians to assess outcomes of certain treatments commonly used in autistic individuals. In this study, scores were calculated for the total score and the four separate subscales.

### **Safety Assessments**

In descending order, the most common side effects found during HBOT are barotrauma (2% incidence), sinus squeeze, serous otitis, claustrophobia, reversible myopia, and new onset seizure (which occurs in 1-3 per 10,000 treatments) [10]. Before beginning the study, each child underwent a physical examination by either DAR or EM; this included close examination of the ears and tympanic membranes. Children with a history of seizure disorder were excluded from the study. During each treatment, a parent or caregiver entered the chamber with each child.

Throughout the treatment, children were monitored closely by the chamber operator for any signs of ear pain, and parents were instructed on how to recognize ear pain in their child. One child in the 1.5 atm group could not tolerate the pressure given during the first HBOT session, and the treatment had to be stopped after just several minutes (the pressure obtained in this session was approximately 1.1 atm). Examination of the child's ears did not demonstrate any barotrauma. However, the child's tympanostomy tubes had recently fallen out; these were replaced before continuing the trial, and the child was able to finish 40 treatments without further incident. No other adverse events were found during this study, including barotrauma or seizures. All children finished 40 hyperbaric treatments.

### **Data analysis**

All data are presented as means  $\pm$  SDs. Statistical differences in changes in each scale (ABC-C, SRS, and ATEC) and changes in CRP and oxidative stress markers between baseline versus end of 40 hyperbaric treatments were ascertained by using the Student's *t* test with significance set at 0.05.

## **Results**

### **Oxidative stress profiles**

**Table 2** **Figure 1 (a-d)** lists the oxidative stress profile findings. **Mean** plasma oxidized glutathione (GSSG) did not significantly change in either the 1.3 atm group ( $p = 0.557$ ) or the 1.5 atm group ( $p = 0.583$ ). Total plasma glutathione (tGSH) **to GSSG ratio (tGSH/GSSG)** and free glutathione (fGSH) **to GSSG ratio (fGSH/GSSG)** both decreased after HBOT at 1.3 atm and 1.5 atm. **Mean adenosine slightly increased at 1.3 atm, and decreased at 1.5 atm.**

<<<Insert **Table 2** **Figure 1 (a-d)** here>>>

## CRP profiles

Figure 2 shows the changes in mean CRP in both groups. In the 1.3 atm group, mean CRP level declined by 89.5% from  $6.1 \pm 10.3$  mg/L to  $0.64 \pm 0.87$  mg/L ( $p = 0.100$ ). Of note, 3 children had a mean starting CRP value of  $21.8 \pm 9.2$  mg/L (“high CRP group”), which declined to 0.2 mg/L in each ( $p = 0.055$ ) after hyperbaric therapy. Analysis of the remaining 9 children (“low CRP group”) demonstrated no significant change in mean CRP values ( $0.88$  mg/L to  $0.79$  mg/L,  $p = 0.854$ ). ~~Comparison of the change in mean CRP values between the high CRP group (21.6 mg/L) and the low CRP group (0.09 mg/L) demonstrated statistical significance ( $p = 0.00004$ ).~~ In the 1.5 atm group, mean CRP declined by 61.4% from  $0.7 \pm 0.5$  mg/L to  $0.27 \pm 0.19$  mg/L ( $p = 0.099$ ).

<<<Insert **Figure 2** here>>>

## Clinical Outcomes

### 1.3 atm group analysis

Table 3 2 shows improvements in SRS ( $p = 0.046$ ) and ATEC ( $p = 0.030$ ) for the 12 children in the 1.3 atm group. Evaluation of the ABC-C, SRS, and ATEC subscales (~~Table 4~~ **Figure 3a-c**) demonstrates improvements in SRS communication ( $p = 0.035$ ); SRS motivation ( $p = 0.011$ ); SRS mannerisms ( $p = 0.011$ ); ATEC speech/language/communication ( $p = 0.033$ ); ATEC sensory/cognitive awareness ( $p = 0.026$ ); and ATEC health/physical/behavior ( $p = 0.012$ ).

### 1.5 atm group analysis

Table 5 3 shows improvements in SRS ( $p = 0.035$ ) and ATEC ( $p = 0.020$ ) for the 6 children in the 1.5 atm group. Examination of the subscales (~~Table 6~~ **Figure 4a-c**) demonstrates

improvements in ABC-C lethargy ( $p = 0.008$ ); SRS motivation ( $p = 0.018$ ); ATEC speech/language/communication ( $p = 0.040$ ); and ATEC sensory/cognitive awareness ( $p = 0.013$ ).

<<<Insert Tables 3-6 2 and 3, Figures 3(a-c) and 4(a-c) here>>>

## Discussion

To our knowledge, this study represents the first prospective study on the use of HBOT for children with autism autistic individuals. In this current study, lower hyperbaric pressures were used than those traditionally employed (pressures of 2.0 atm and above) for the treatment of most clinical indications. However, significant increases in calculated oxygen delivery were obtained during this study. The oxygen concentration in room air at sea level (1 atm) is 160 mmHg. The two study sites were located at approximately 500 and 900 feet above sea level (0.97-0.98 atm). Therefore, the calculated oxygen delivery in the 1.3 atm group was approximately 230 mmHg which is roughly 44% more than room air conditions. In the 1.5 atm group, the calculated oxygen delivery was 1142 mmHg, or over 7 times more than room air conditions.

A primary goal of this study was to determine the effects of HBOT on oxidative stress markers in autistic children. Other objectives were to measure the effects of HBOT on CRP and changes in clinical symptoms. The final intention was to examine the safety of HBOT for use in autistic children. Of note, shorter duration hyperbaric treatment times (45 minutes) were used than what is traditional (60 minutes). This was due, in part, to scheduling parameters.

### Evaluation of the effects of HBOT on oxidative stress markers

Recently, James et al. demonstrated that autistic children had lower levels of plasma reduced (active) GSH and increased levels of oxidized (inactive) GSH when compared to **neurotypical** control children [51 43]. The mean tGSH/GSSG ratio in 73 control children was  $28.2 \pm 7.0$   ~~$7.53 \pm 1.7 \mu\text{mol/L}$~~  and in 80 autistic children was  $14.7 \pm 6.2$   ~~$5.1 \pm 1.2 \mu\text{mol/L}$~~  ( $p < 0.0001$ ). The mean fGSH/GSSG ratio was  $7.9 \pm 3.5$   ~~$2.2 \pm 0.9 \mu\text{mol/L}$~~  in control children and  $4.9 \pm 2.2$   ~~$1.4 \pm 0.5 \mu\text{mol/L}$~~  in the autistic children ( $p < 0.0001$ ). The mean GSSG in control children was  $0.24 \pm 0.1 \mu\text{mol/L}$  and  $0.40 \pm 0.2 \mu\text{mol/L}$  in the autistic children ( $p < 0.0001$ ) [51 43]. In a previous study, these same researchers demonstrated that the addition of 800  $\mu\text{g}$  folic acid, 1000 mg of betaine, and 75  $\mu\text{g/kg}$  of injectable methylcobalamin raised tGSH/GSSG in 8 autistic children from  $7.5 \pm 2.3$   ~~$4.0 \pm 0.7 \mu\text{mol/L}$~~  to  $28.7 \pm 7.1$  ( $p = 0.002$ )  ~~$6.7 \pm 1.6 \mu\text{mol/L}$~~  ( $p = 0.016$ ) and lowered GSSG from  $0.59 \pm 0.2 \text{ nmol/L}$  to  $0.25 \pm 0.05 \text{ nmol/L}$  ( $p = 0.008$ ). These 8 children had some improvements in speech and cognition, and after these treatments, the levels of tGSH/GSSG and GSSG were both near the levels found in the **neurotypical** control children [50 42].

In the current study, the mean initial tGSH/GSSG was  $28.47 \pm 4.59$   ~~$7.44 \pm 1.58 \mu\text{mol/L}$~~  in the 1.3 atm group and  $44.68 \pm 14.19$   ~~$8.00 \pm 0.67 \mu\text{mol/L}$~~  in the 1.5 atm group (see Figure 1b). These values are close to **or higher than the** values found in the **neurotypical** control children as described above and are higher than the values described in some autistic children [50,51 42,43]. These increased values might be due to the therapies implemented to raise glutathione levels, including folic acid and methylcobalamin, which many of the children were taking prior to beginning the study. Examination of the 1.3 atm group demonstrates that 7 out of 12 children were taking folic acid, methylcobalamin, or both. In the 1.5 atm group, 5 out of the 6 children were taking folic acid, methylcobalamin, or both. Interestingly, analysis of changes in CRP

and oxidative stress markers in the children on these 2 supplements when compared to the children not taking these 2 supplements demonstrated no statistically significant difference in changes in CRP, GSSG, tGSH/GSSG, and fGSH/GSSG between these two groups (data not shown) at both 1.3 atm and 1.5 atm. In addition, analysis of score changes on the ABC-C, SRS, and ATEC showed no statistically significant difference in the children taking either or both of these 2 supplements when compared to children not taking these (data not shown). In other words, children already taking folic acid, methylcobalamin, or both had similar changes in markers of oxidative stress, CRP, and clinical outcomes as children not taking these supplements.

In both the 1.3 atm and 1.5 atm groups, after hyperbaric treatment, the ratios levels of tGSH/GSSG and fGSH/GSSG were both close to the values described by James et al. in neurotypical control children [51] (see Figure 1b-c). ~~After treatment with HBOT at 1.5 atm, the levels of tGSH and fGSH were somewhat lower than the neurotypical values.~~ However, the ratios levels of tGSH/GSSG and fGSH/GSSG after treatment at both 1.3 atm and 1.5 atm were still higher than the levels found in most autistic children [51 43]. Most importantly, from an oxidative stress standpoint, the GSSG levels in both the 1.3 atm and 1.5 atm groups did not significantly change with treatment and were very near to the GSSG levels found in neurotypical control children (see Figure 1a). Plasma GSSG is a reliable marker of intracellular oxidative stress because it is only exported from cells when intracellular levels exceed the redox capacity. Furthermore, plasma GSSG levels are a better indicator of intracellular oxidative stress than tGSH and fGSH [80 66]. Therefore, HBOT at the pressures utilized in this study did not appreciably worsen intracellular oxidative stress as measured by changes in plasma GSSG. In addition, there was a trend to lower adenosine levels in the 1.5 atm group ( $p = 0.078$ ). Elevated

adenosine has been described in a subgroup of children with autism and typically leads to elevated S-adenosylhomocysteine (SAH). This is concerning because SAH inhibits most cellular methyltransferases [51]. Therefore, lowering adenosine levels could be of clinical significance in a subgroup of autistic children with elevated adenosine levels.

Even though children in this study had similar changes in oxidative stress markers, CRP, and clinical outcomes whether or not they were taking folic acid or methylcobalamin, therapies to raise glutathione levels in autistic children [50 42] before initiating HBOT at the pressures used in this study appear prudent. Furthermore, the use of antioxidants [81 67] might be beneficial in patients with conditions of increased oxidative stress before HBOT is contemplated, especially since antioxidant supplementation is generally recognized as safe. Several antioxidant supplements are known to attenuate oxidative stress induced by higher pressure HBOT (above 2.5 atm) including  $\alpha$ -lipoic acid [48 40], melatonin [82 68], N-acetylcysteine [83,84 69,70], Vitamin E [85 71], riboflavin [86 72], selenium [85,86 71,72], and glutathione [87 73]. Furthermore, in one double-blind study, treatment with an antioxidant, when compared to a placebo, improved behavior in some autistic children [88 74].

### **Evaluation of the effects of HBOT on C-reactive protein**

Since some autistic children have evidence of neuroinflammation [35-37 27-29] and gastrointestinal inflammation [38,39 30,31], and HBOT is known to possess anti-inflammatory properties [43,89 35,75] and can decrease both neuroinflammation [42 34] and gastrointestinal inflammation [46,47 38,39], changes in a marker of inflammation were quantified during this study. CRP was chosen (see Figure 2) because it is typically elevated with inflammation [90 76] and is readily available. In 3 children from the 1.3 atm group with a very high initial CRP, large improvements in mean CRP were found after treatment ( $p = 0.055$ ). The remaining 9 children in

the 1.3 atm group had a small but non-significant improvement of 0.09 mg/L. However, the initial **mean average** CRP in these 9 children was 0.88 mg/L which left little room for improvement. The 1.5 atm group showed an improvement in mean CRP of 0.43 mg/L ( $p = 0.099$ ). However, since the children in the 1.5 atm group started with low initial CRP levels, dramatic improvements in CRP in these children were not possible. Only those children with an initial high CRP could experience dramatic improvements, which is what was found in this study. Pooling the data for changes in CRP values from all 18 children in this study demonstrated an overall improvement after hyperbaric therapy ( $p = 0.087$ ). Further evaluation of the effects of hyperbaric therapy on inflammation and inflammatory markers in autistic children, especially at varying pressures and oxygen concentrations, is warranted.

### **Evaluation of the effects of HBOT on clinical outcomes**

Another outcome of this study was to prospectively examine if the use of hyperbaric therapy led to improvements in clinical symptoms. From our clinical experience with using HBOT for autistic children, some parents have noted improvements in their children. In this study, an inventory of clinical symptoms affected by HBOT was created to help determine if a larger controlled trial was justified, and to investigate which assessment tools might best be utilized in designing a larger study.

The measurements of these clinical outcomes did have some inherent limitations and weaknesses. The use of parent-rated scales and the fact that parents were not blinded to the type of therapy given to their child might have introduced some bias. Furthermore, there was no placebo or control group. Therefore, the improvements found in this open-label study could be due merely to chance or to the natural development of the children. **In addition, it is possible that any clinical improvements observed could have occurred as a result of the increased close**

interaction between the child and parent/caregiver during the course of treatments. Because this was a pilot study, the sample sizes were small which makes it difficult to make adequate and meaningful comparisons between the 2 different pressures and oxygen concentrations used. Due to these issues, a larger double-blind, prospective study that includes a control group and more objective outcome measures is warranted.

However, given these limitations, significant improvements in certain areas were found in both the 1.3 atm and the 1.5 atm groups. These improvements were seen in diverse areas including irritability, lethargy, hyperactivity, motivation, speech, and sensory/cognitive awareness (see Figures 3 and 4). This range of improvements was somewhat unexpected, but might be explained by the fact that many children with autism have cerebral hypoperfusion which can often vary in location from child to child [34 26] and correlates with many core autistic symptoms including repetitive, self-stimulatory behavior [91 77], and impairments in language [92 78] and social interaction [33 25]. It is possible that HBOT might help overcome the effects of cerebral hypoperfusion by providing more oxygen to the brain [21, 40 14,32], and by causing angiogenesis of new blood vessels over time [89 75]. As previously noted, Heuser et al. showed an improvement in cerebral hypoperfusion as measured by SPECT scans in an autistic child after hyperbaric therapy [28 20]. Perhaps after HBOT, by improving areas of cerebral hypoperfusion, different clinical outcomes might occur. Further research into this area, utilizing HBOT combined with pre- and post-SPECT scans, might be useful in exploring this hypothesis further. We did note a weak trend towards increased inappropriate speech in the 1.3 atm group (see Figure 3a); this finding was not seen in the 1.5 atm group (see Figure 4a). Further study on the effects of HBOT at 1.3 atm on inappropriate speech is warranted.

### **Evaluation of the Safety of HBOT in Autistic Children**

The use of HBOT for ~~neurotypical~~ children is generally regarded as safe, even at pressures of 2.0 atm for 2 hours per day [30 22]. However, to our knowledge, the safety of HBOT for autistic children had not been previously evaluated. Therefore, throughout each hyperbaric session, the children were intensively monitored. In addition, a parent or caregiver accompanied each child into the chamber, which provided additional monitoring. During this study, no significant adverse events were seen and the treatments were well tolerated. These results suggest that the HBOT pressures and oxygen concentrations used in this study are safe in autistic children.

## Conclusions

This prospective open-label pilot study indicates that HBOT ranging from 1.3 to 1.5 atm and 24% oxygen to 100% oxygen was not significantly associated with increased intracellular oxidative stress, as measured by changes in plasma GSSG. The use of therapies to raise glutathione levels and lower oxidative stress before beginning HBOT in autistic individuals appears prudent. Among children with high initial CRP, hyperbaric therapy led to a large improvement in CRP levels; this suggests that inflammation in these children improved with treatment. Improvements in clinical outcomes as measured by several scales were observed at both 1.3 atm and 1.5 atm. However, because this study was open-label, conclusions about the efficacy of HBOT as a treatment for autistic children cannot be drawn at this time. [Definitive statements regarding the efficacy of HBOT for the treatment of children with autism must await results from future double-blind, controlled trials.](#) Finally, HBOT was safely administered to autistic children in this study, and all participants were able to finish 40 HBOT sessions without

any major adverse events. ~~Further evaluation with a larger prospective, randomized, double-blind, controlled study is warranted.~~

## List of abbreviations used

SPECT — Single photon emission computed tomography

HBOT — Hyperbaric oxygen therapy

atm — Atmosphere

PDD-NOS — Pervasive Developmental Disorder—Not Otherwise Specified

ABC-C — Aberrant Behavior Checklist-Community

CARS — Childhood Autism Rating Scale

SRS — Social Responsiveness Scale

ATEC — Autism Treatment Evaluation Checklist

GSSG — Oxidized glutathione

GSH — Glutathione

tGSH — Total glutathione

fGSH — Free glutathione

SOD — Superoxide dismutase

CRP — C-reactive protein

SAH — S-adenosylhomocysteine

## Competing interests

DAR, LWR, and EM received funding and reimbursements from the International Hyperbarics Association in conjunction with this study. The remaining authors (SJJ and SM) declare that they have no competing interests.

## **Authors' contributions**

DAR and LWR conceived of the study and the study design. SJJ and SM carried out the oxidative stress marker analysis. DAR, LWR, EM oversaw the hyperbaric treatments. DAR, SJJ, LWR, and EM contributed to the drafting of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank Dr. Jeff Bradstreet, Dr. Paul Harch, Mr. Michael Haynes, Dr. Jim Neubrandner, Dr. Jon Pangborn, Dr. Lauren Underwood, and Dr. Kyle Van Dyke for reviewing this manuscript and offering advice. Our gratitude goes to Susan Robinson for data collection and study coordination at the Advocates for Children site. We appreciate the work of our HBOT technicians: Catherine Adams, Kelly Concklin, Leigh Cooper, and Jordan Robinson. We are grateful for the work of Shannon Kenitz of the International Hyperbarics Association (IHA) for an unrestricted grant which funded the study, which included use of chambers and funding for all blood analysis and hyperbaric technician salaries during the study. The IHA had no role in the study design, collection, analysis, interpretation of data, writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to submit the manuscript for publication. We especially thank the parents of the children in our study who provided multiple pages of observations for analysis.

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**Table 1:** Baseline participant characteristics and supplement profiles

|  | 1.3 atm group | 1.5 atm group | Comparison between groups (p-value) |
|--|---------------|---------------|-------------------------------------|
| <b>A. Child characteristics</b>                |               |               |                                     |
| Age Range                                      | 3-16          | 3-16          |                                     |
| Mean Age                                       | 6.2 ± 4.0     | 7.7 ± 4.5     | 0.484                               |
| Mean initial CARS score                        | 33.8 ± 6.3    | 34.4 ± 8.0    | 0.849                               |
|  |               |               |                                     |
| <b>B. Percentage of children on supplement</b> |               |               |                                     |
| Multivitamin                                   | 92%           | 100%          | 0.496                               |
| Minerals                                       | 75%           | 67%           | 0.729                               |

|                     |     |      |       |
|---------------------|-----|------|-------|
| Digestive Enzymes   | 42% | 17%  | 0.104 |
| Probiotics          | 50% | 17%  | 0.192 |
| Omega-3 fatty acids | 92% | 100% | 0.496 |
| Methylcobalamin     | 58% | 83%  | 0.317 |
| Folinic acid        | 42% | 83%  | 0.104 |
| Glutathione         | 25% | 50%  | 0.317 |

**Table 3 2:** Aggregate mean scores for 12 children at 1.3 atm, 24% oxygen

| <b>1.3 atm</b>            | Mean Score Before HBOT | Mean Score After HBOT | Percentage Improvement | p-value      |
|---------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|--------------|
| ABC-C                     | 44.4 ± 22.0            | 40.2 ± 21.5           | 9.5                    | 0.458        |
| SRS                       | 104.3 ± 29.8           | 87.1 ± 22.9           | 16.5                   | <b>0.046</b> |
| ATEC                      | 61.4 ± 20.8            | 54.6 ± 17.2           | 11.1                   | <b>0.030</b> |
| C-reactive protein (mg/L) | 6.1 ± 10.3             | 0.64 ± 0.87           | 89.5                   | 0.100        |

**Table 5 3:** Aggregate mean scores for 6 children at 1.5 atm, 100% oxygen

| <b>1.5 atm</b>            | Mean Score Before HBOT | Mean Score After HBOT | Percentage Improvement | p-value      |
|---------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|--------------|
| ABC-C                     | 56.3 ± 27.3            | 43.2 ± 25.9           | 23.3                   | 0.063        |
| SRS                       | 112.3 ± 30.9           | 95 ± 38.9             | 15.4                   | <b>0.035</b> |
| ATEC                      | 61.2 ± 28.0            | 52.2 ± 28.0           | 14.7                   | <b>0.020</b> |
| C-reactive protein (mg/L) | 0.7 ± 0.5              | 0.27 ± 0.19           | 61.4                   | 0.099        |

**Table 2:** Oxidative stress marker measurements before and after HBOT

| <b>1.3 atm</b>  | Mean-Value Before HBOT | Mean-Value After HBOT | Percentage Change | p-value      |
|-----------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| tGSH (µmol/L)   | 7.44 ± 1.58            | 6.88 ± 0.90           | -7.5              | 0.113        |
| fGSH (µmol/L)   | 2.09 ± 0.52            | 1.82 ± 0.31           | -12.9             | <b>0.028</b> |
| GSSG (nmol/L)   | 0.26 ± 0.05            | 0.27 ± 0.04           | 3.8               | 0.557        |
| tGSH/GSSG-ratio | 28.47 ± 4.59           | 25.65 ± 4.93          | -9.9              | 0.146        |
| fGSH/GSSG-ratio | 8.02 ± 1.61            | 6.78 ± 1.48           | -15.5             | <b>0.040</b> |

| <b>1.5 atm</b> | Mean-Value Before HBOT | Mean-Value After HBOT | Percentage Change | p-value      |
|----------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| tGSH (µmol/L)  | 8.00 ± 0.67            | 5.70 ± 0.79           | -28.8             | <b>0.003</b> |

|                            |                   |                  |       |              |
|----------------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------|--------------|
| fGSH ( $\mu\text{mol/L}$ ) | $2.18 \pm 0.31$   | $1.50 \pm 0.24$  | -31.2 | <b>0.007</b> |
| GSSG (nmol/L)              | $0.20 \pm 0.07$   | $0.22 \pm 0.04$  | 10.0  | 0.583        |
| tGSH/GSSG-ratio            | $44.68 \pm 14.19$ | $26.88 \pm 6.90$ | -39.8 | 0.072        |
| fGSH/GSSG-ratio            | $12.25 \pm 4.33$  | $7.07 \pm 1.78$  | -42.3 | 0.076        |

**Table 4:** Aggregate Subscale Scores on 12 children at 1.3 atm, 24% oxygen

| <b>1.3 atm</b><br><b>ABC-C</b> | Mean Score<br>Before HBOT | Mean Score<br>After HBOT | Percentage<br>Improvement | -<br>p-value |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|--------------|
| Irritability                   | $9.5 \pm 8.6$             | $7.8 \pm 7.6$            | 17.9                      | 0.230        |
| Lethargy                       | $10.5 \pm 5.3$            | $7.7 \pm 4.9$            | 26.7                      | 0.060        |
| Stereotypy                     | $7.3 \pm 5.3$             | $6.5 \pm 3.3$            | 11.0                      | 0.523        |
| Hyperactivity                  | $15.0 \pm 9.0$            | $16.0 \pm 10.5$          | -6.7                      | 0.666        |
| Inappropriate Speech           | $2.2 \pm 2.1$             | $3.1 \pm 3.3$            | -40.9                     | 0.204        |
| <b>SRS</b>                     | -                         | -                        | -                         | -            |
| Awareness                      | $13.3 \pm 4.9$            | $12.5 \pm 3.5$           | 6.0                       | 0.555        |
| Cognition                      | $18.3 \pm 6.7$            | $18.3 \pm 4.1$           | 0                         | 0.960        |
| Communication                  | $36.9 \pm 10.6$           | $29.4 \pm 8.9$           | 7.4                       | <b>0.035</b> |
| Motivation                     | $15.7 \pm 5.8$            | $11.7 \pm 5.3$           | 25.5                      | <b>0.011</b> |
| Mannerisms                     | $19.3 \pm 7.3$            | $15.2 \pm 4.9$           | 21.2                      | <b>0.011</b> |
| <b>ATEC</b>                    | -                         | -                        | -                         | -            |
| Speech/Language/Communication  | $13.6 \pm 7.6$            | $12.2 \pm 6.7$           | 10.3                      | <b>0.033</b> |
| Sociability                    | $10.7 \pm 7.2$            | $11.3 \pm 4.8$           | -5.6                      | 0.699        |
| Sensory/Cognitive Awareness    | $14.1 \pm 5.2$            | $12.1 \pm 5.1$           | 14.2                      | <b>0.026</b> |
| Health/Physical/Behavior       | $24.3 \pm 8.6$            | $19.1 \pm 8.5$           | 21.4                      | <b>0.012</b> |

**Table 6:** Aggregate Subscale Scores of 6 children at 1.5 atm, 100% oxygen

| <b>1.5 atm</b><br><b>ABC-C</b> | Mean Score<br>Before HBOT | Mean Score<br>After HBOT | Percentage<br>Improvement | -<br>p-value |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|--------------|
| Irritability                   | $8.5 \pm 5.1$             | $7.8 \pm 4.1$            | 8.2                       | 0.430        |
| Lethargy                       | $14.7 \pm 8.2$            | $7.5 \pm 7.0$            | 49.0                      | <b>0.008</b> |
| Stereotypy                     | $8.8 \pm 6.0$             | $8.2 \pm 6.9$            | 6.8                       | 0.328        |
| Hyperactivity                  | $20.0 \pm 10.7$           | $16.0 \pm 10.6$          | 20.0                      | 0.187        |
| Inappropriate Speech           | $4.3 \pm 3.1$             | $3.7 \pm 2.9$            | 14.0                      | 0.235        |
| <b>SRS</b>                     | -                         | -                        | -                         | -            |
| Awareness                      | $15.3 \pm 5.0$            | $13.5 \pm 6.7$           | 11.8                      | 0.168        |
| Cognition                      | $20.7 \pm 6.3$            | $17.3 \pm 8.1$           | 16.4                      | 0.070        |
| Communication                  | $39.2 \pm 11.1$           | $33.5 \pm 13.7$          | 14.5                      | 0.072        |

|                               |            |             |      |       |
|-------------------------------|------------|-------------|------|-------|
| Motivation                    | 16.7 ± 5.8 | 11.0 ± 3.7  | 34.1 | 0.018 |
| Mannerisms                    | 20.5 ± 6.6 | 18.8 ± 8.2  | 8.3  | 0.329 |
| <b>ATEC</b>                   | -          | -           | -    | -     |
| Speech/Language/Communication | 13.3 ± 6.3 | 11.0 ± 4.9  | 17.3 | 0.040 |
| Sociability                   | 14.7 ± 9.2 | 12.2 ± 8.9  | 17.0 | 0.131 |
| Sensory/Cognitive Awareness   | 14.2 ± 6.1 | 10.8 ± 5.9  | 23.9 | 0.013 |
| Health/Physical/Behavior      | 19.0 ± 9.2 | 18.2 ± 11.3 | 4.2  | 0.625 |

**Figure 1a-d:** Changes in mean blood values before and after hyperbaric therapy. The first column in a-d is data from control children as described by James et al [51].

**Figure 1a:** Changes in mean oxidized glutathione levels

**Figure 1b:** Changes in mean tGSH/GSSG ratio

**Figure 1c:** Changes in mean fGSH/GSSG ratio

**Figure 1d:** Changes in mean adenosine levels

**Figure 2:** Changes in mean CRP before and after hyperbaric therapy

**Figure 3 a-c:** Changes in clinical scales at 1.3 atm and 24% oxygen. Declining scores on each scale indicate clinical improvements. Scores are listed at baseline (0) and after every 10 treatments (10, 20, 30, and 40). P-values are listed above the bar graphs.

**Figure 3a:** Changes in ABC-C at 1.3 atm and 24% oxygen

**Figure 3b:** Changes in SRS at 1.3 atm and 24% oxygen

**Figure 3c:** Changes in ATEC at 1.3 atm and 24% oxygen

**Figure 4 a-c:** Changes in clinical scales at 1.5 atm and 100% oxygen. Declining scores on each scale indicate clinical improvements. Scores are listed at baseline (0) and after every 10 treatments (10, 20, 30, and 40). P-values are listed above the bar graphs.

**Figure 4a:** Changes in ABC-C at 1.5 atm and 100% oxygen

**Figure 4b:** Changes in SRS at 1.5 atm and 100% oxygen

**Figure 4c:** Changes in ATEC at 1.5 atm and 100% oxygen

Figure 1a

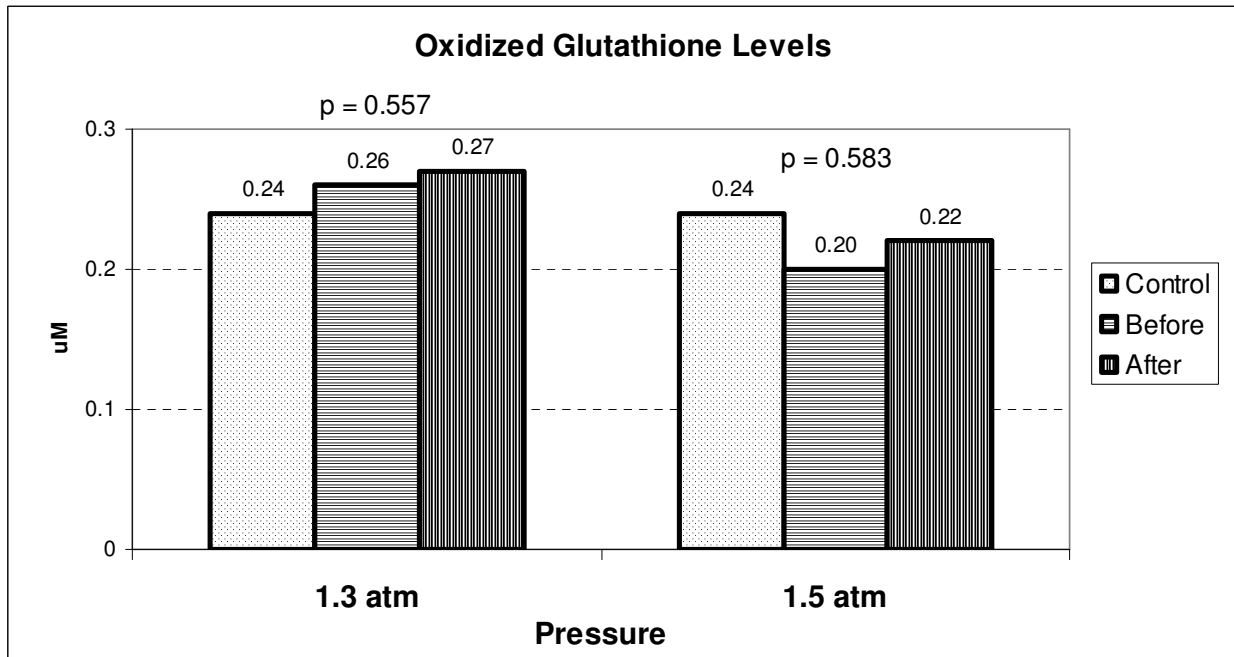


Figure 1b

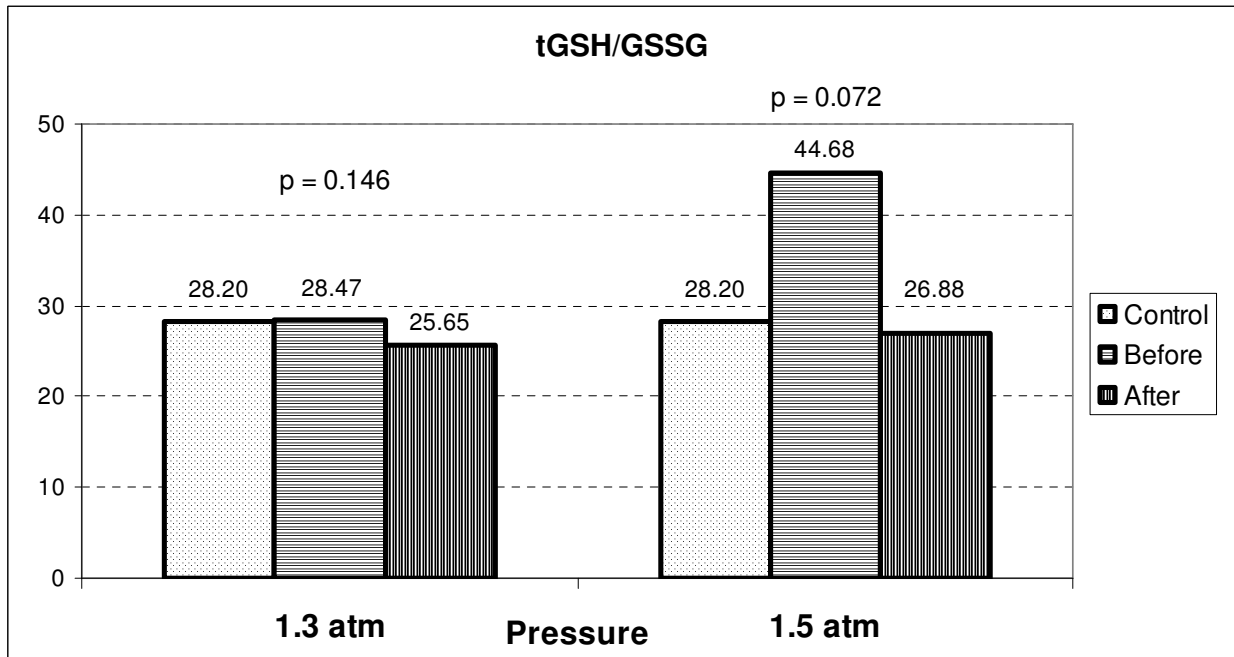


Figure 1c

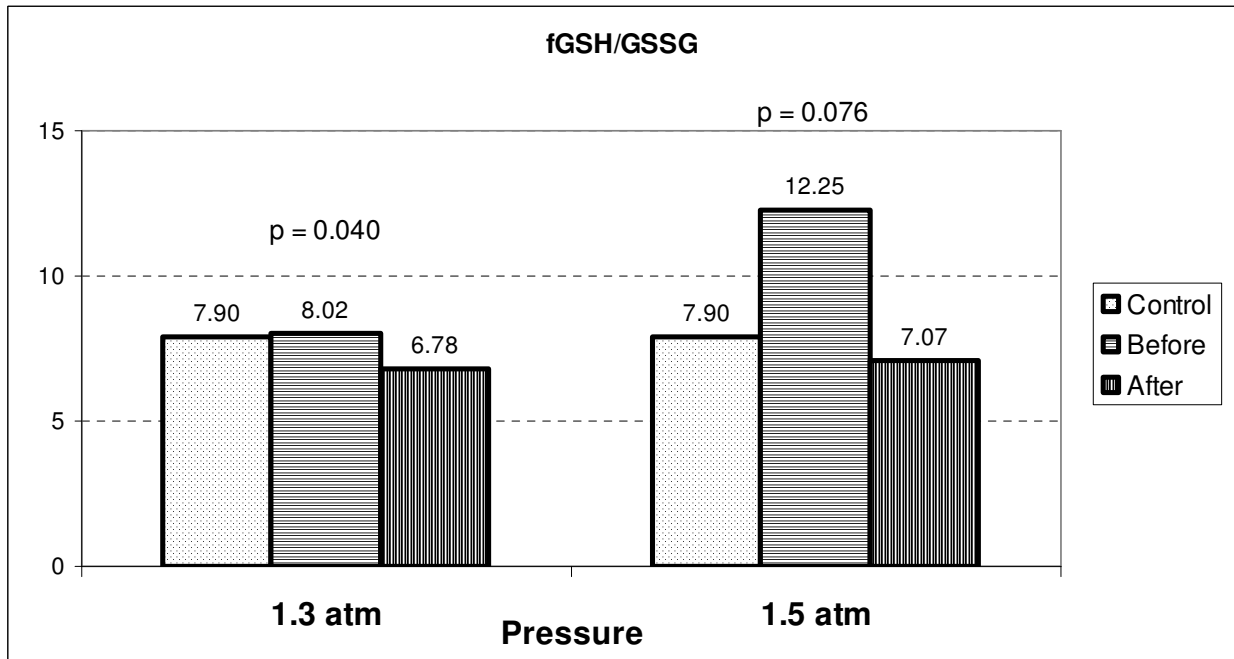


Figure 1d

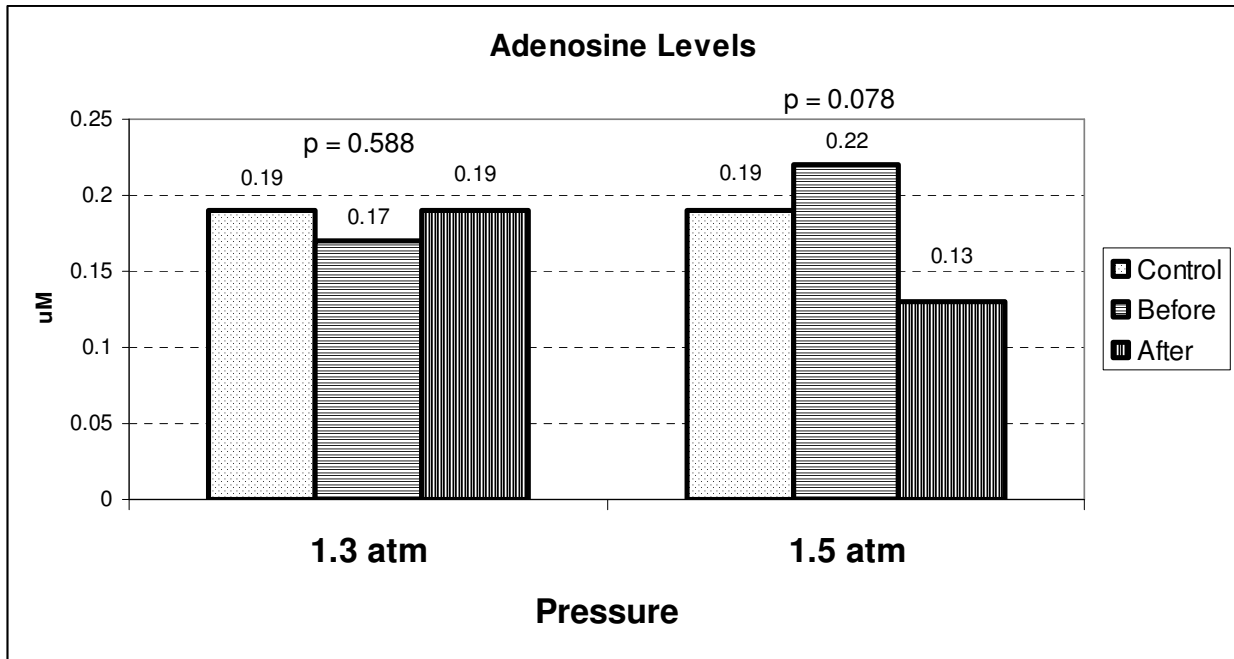


Figure 2

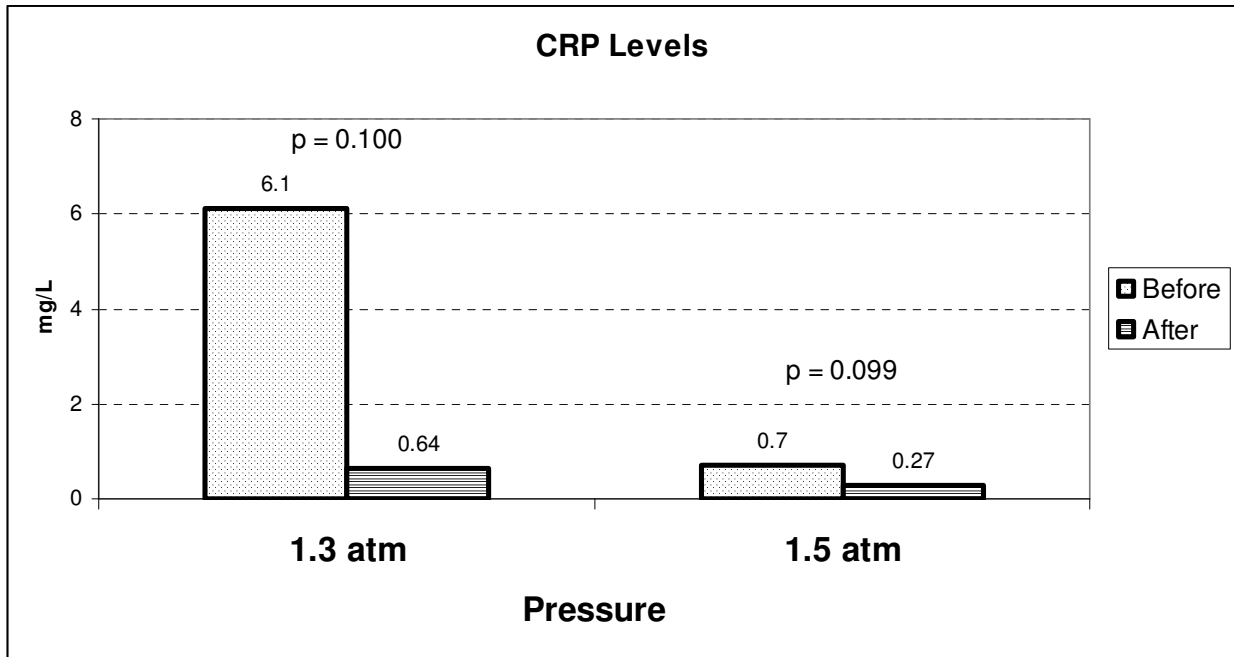


Figure 3a

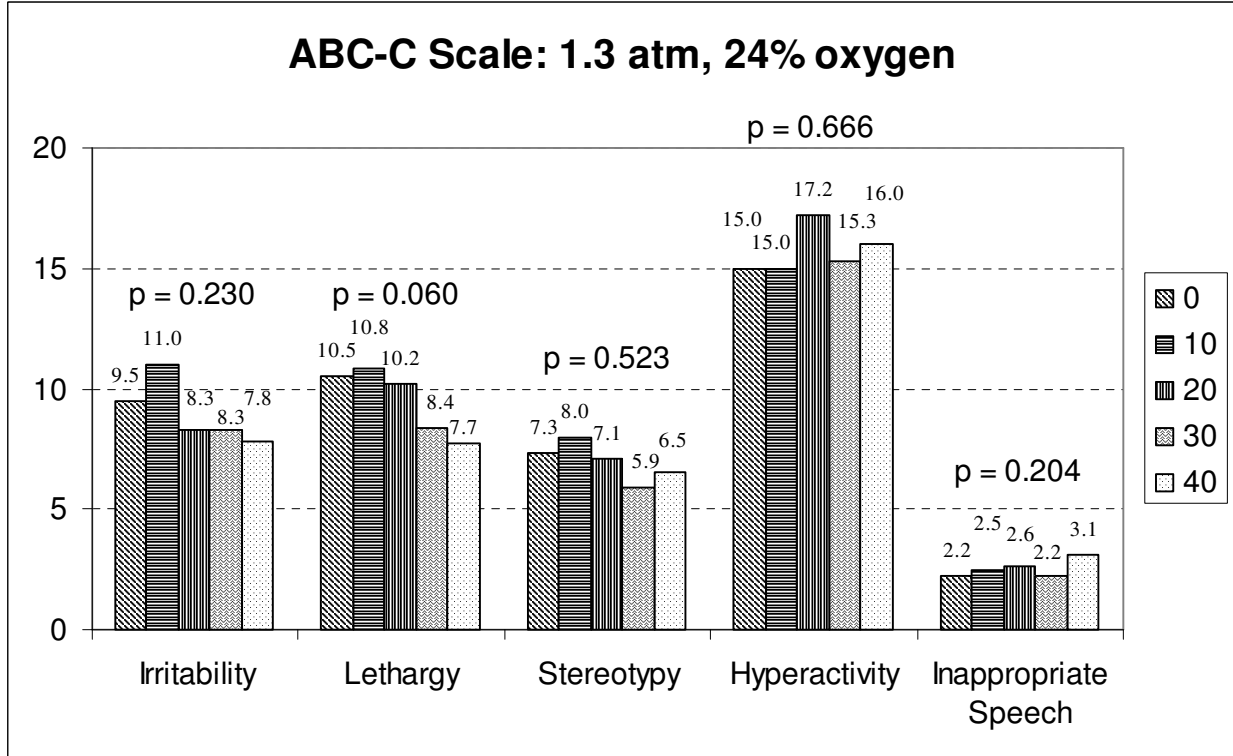


Figure 3b

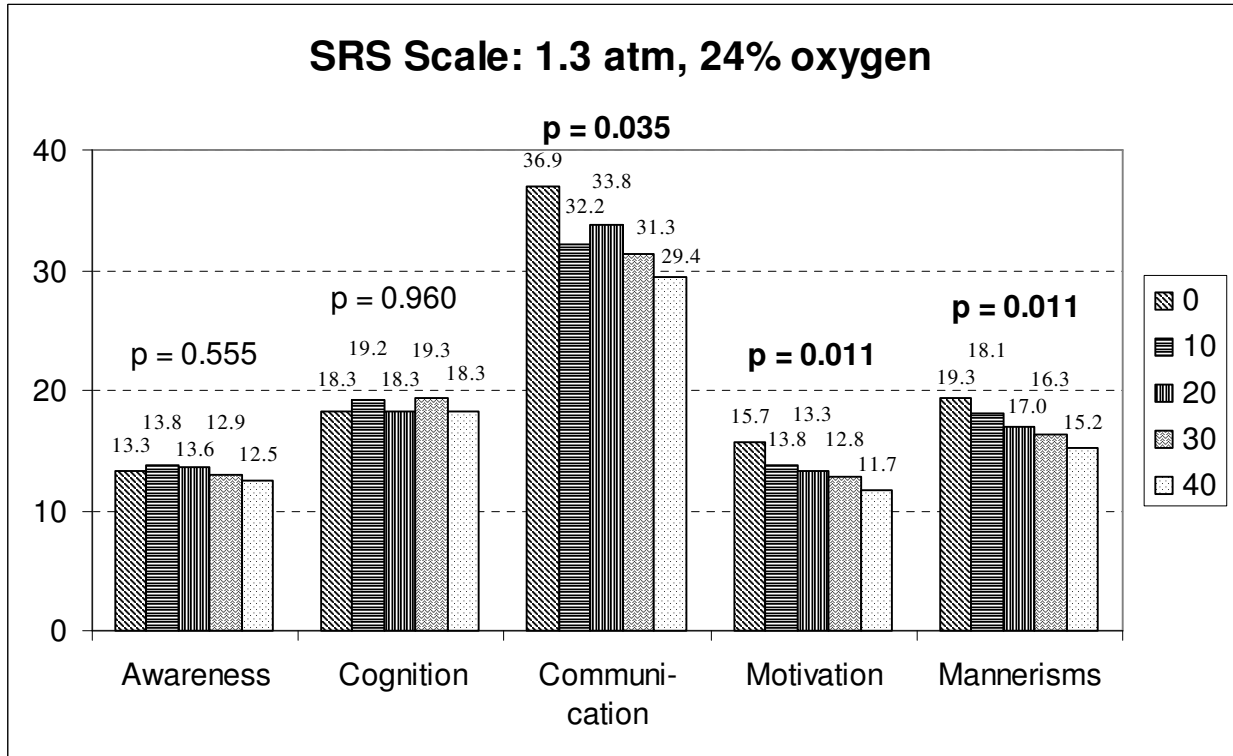


Figure 3c

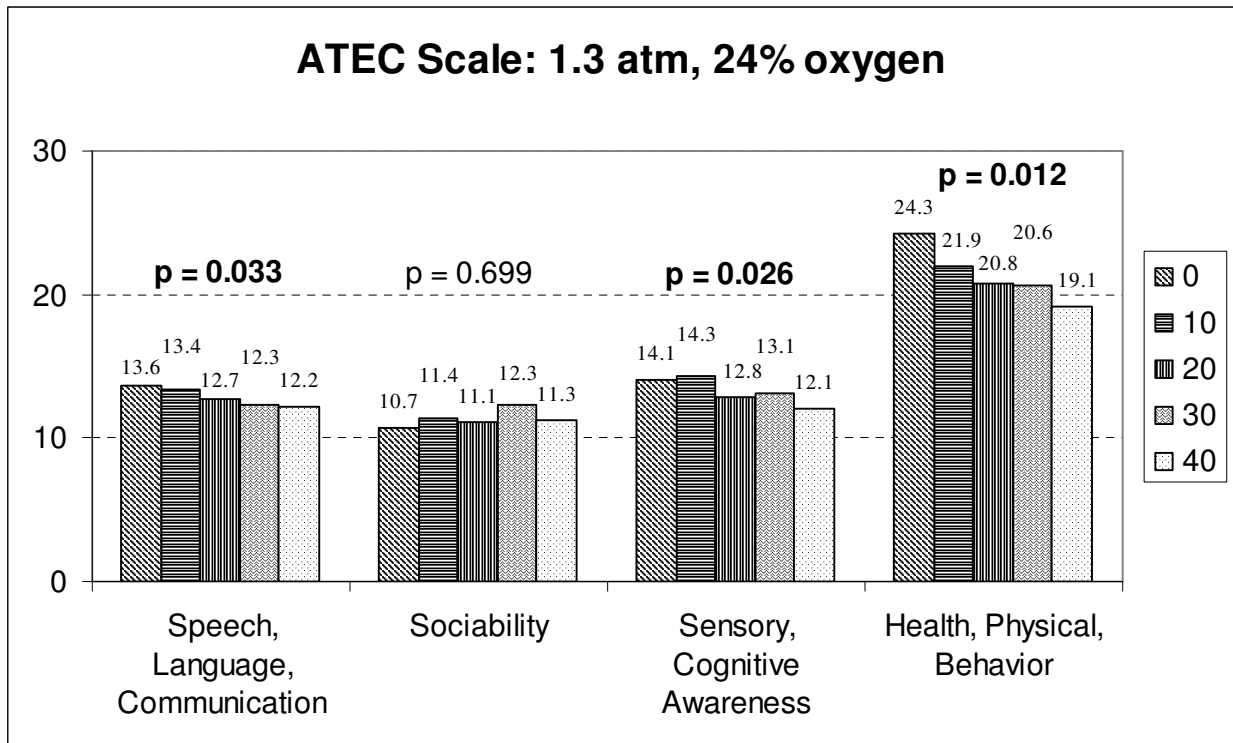


Figure 4a

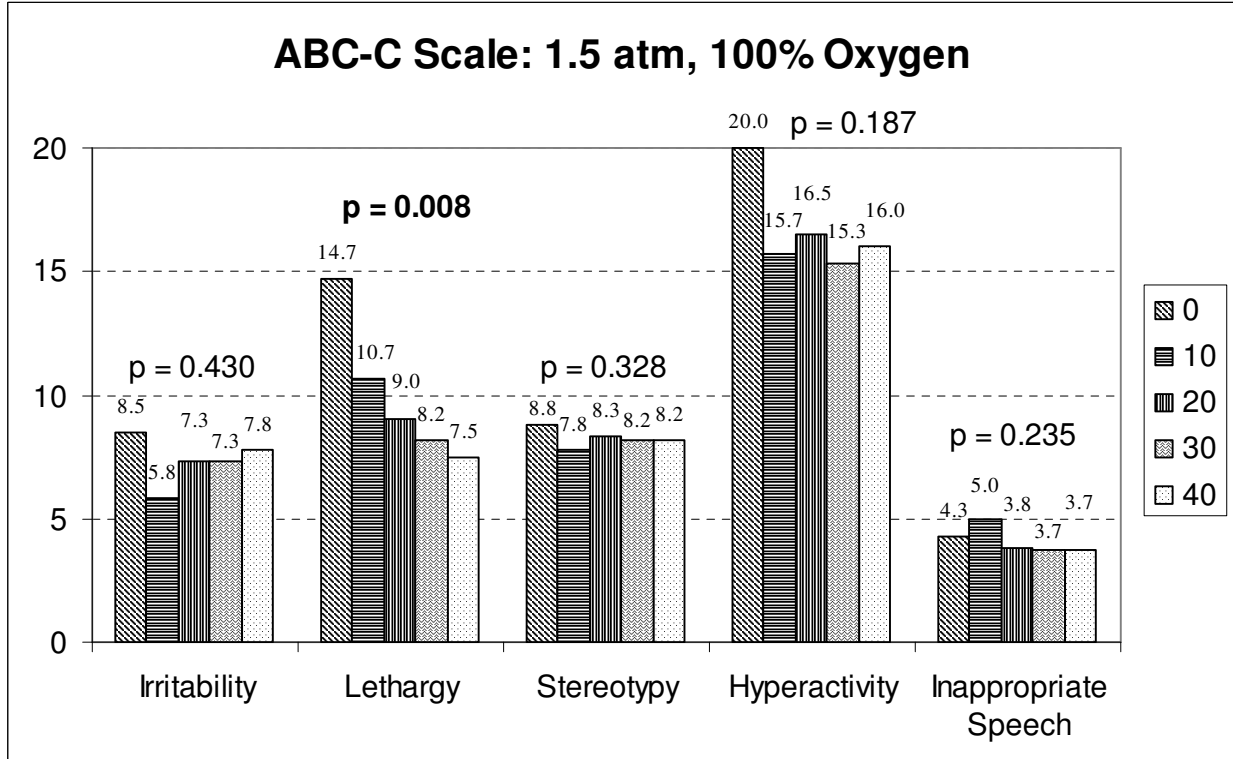


Figure 4b

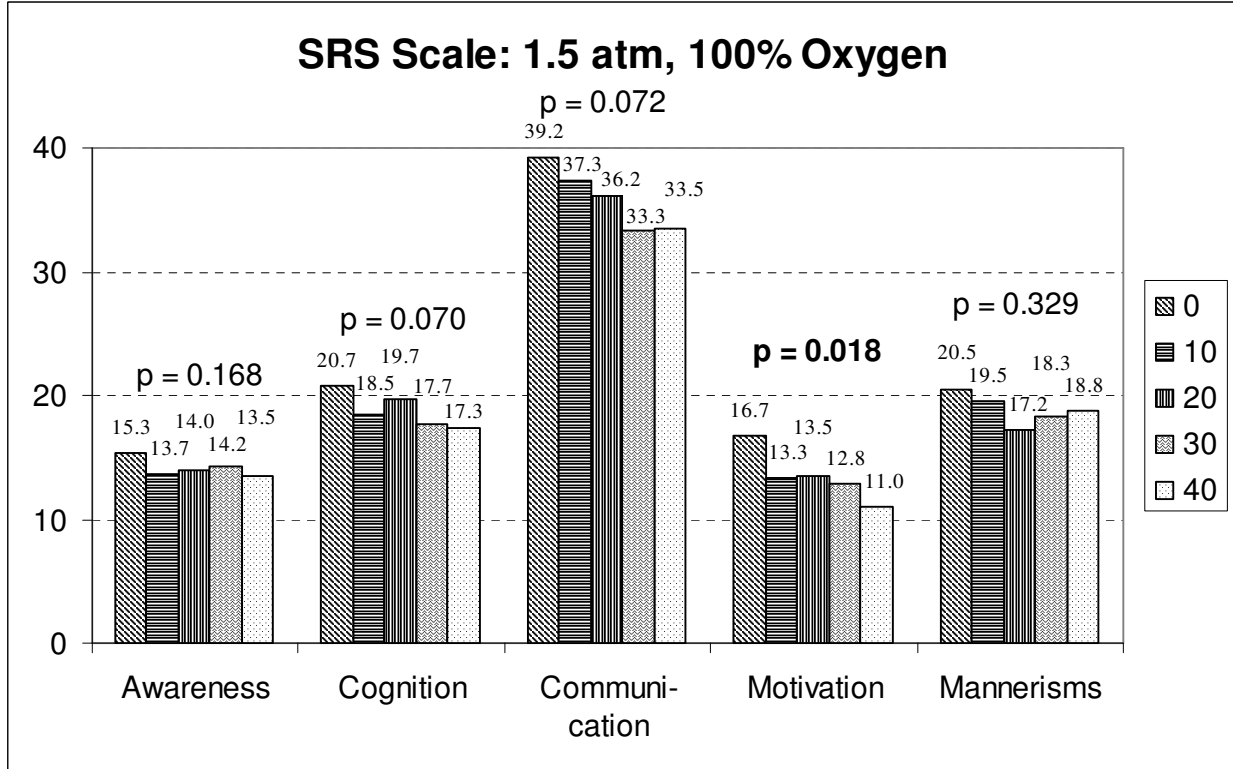


Figure 4c

