Ultrasound stethoscope is not a substitute of physical examination

In his interesting article “The decline of our physical examination skills: is echocardiography to blame?”, Dr Roelandt outlines several reasons on the decline of physical examination skills and, at the same time, exalts the advantages of the so-called ‘ultrasound stethoscope’. We make a clarification and also remember a fundamental aspect of physical examination.

Comparing physical examination with ‘ultrasound stethoscope’ is like trying to compare a part with the whole. Classically, there are two methods of examining a patient: one that begins at the top of the head and ends with the toes; another is to examine the various systems of the body, one by one, in a logical sequence. In any case, physical examination is much more than cardiac auscultation (ultrasound stethoscope).

It is worthy to emphasize that physical examination is essential in the doctor–patient relationship. It is an intangible benefit and should not be replaced by a device.

Therefore, we may definitely agree with Dr Roelandt that pocket-size ultrasound devices could be used as an aid and a supplement tool to the classic physical examination, but not as a substitute.

Isidre Vilacosta*
Alberto San Roman
San Carlos University Hospital, Prof Martin Lagos, s/n, 28040 Madrid, Spain
*Corresponding author. Tel: +34-0913303149.
Email: i.vilacosta@gmail.com

Ultrasound stethoscope is not a substitute of physical examination: Reply

Thank you for the comments on my paper. I rarely re-read my papers but did it now and could not find a passage in which I equated cardiac auscultation with the physical examination.1

In my paper, I emphasized that a physical examination integrated with ultrasound stethoscope significantly increases its diagnostic yield and adds greater accuracy, and that unexpected but clinically relevant abnormalities are diagnosed in 20% of patients. Many important clinical conditions elusive to the traditional physical examination are easily detected by ultrasound stethoscope at the point of care. Justification for the integration of the ultrasound stethoscope as an aid in the physical examination is further supported by the experience of many and the data of several studies, indicating that fellows and cardiologists after a brief training with an ultrasound stethoscope greatly improve their diagnostic performance over history, traditional physical examination (with aural stethoscope), and ECG alone.

It is also common experience that immediately showing and discussing the imaging data during the physical examination helps the patient in understanding his cardiac problem (if any) and that the device therefore greatly benefits the doctor–patient relationship.

Clearly, I have not written or even suggested that the ultrasound stethoscope is a substitute for the physical examination. I only stressed that it should be a part of it.

Reference

J.R.T.C. Roelandt*
Thoraxcenter, Erasmus Medical Center, Rotterdam, the Netherlands
*Corresponding author: j.r.t.c.roelandt@gmail.com