



Handheld portable ultrasound as an affordable alternative in resource-limited countries. A single-center observational study.

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Abstract

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Introduction: Percutaneous native kidney biopsy (PNKB) is crucial for diagnosing renal pathology. In resource-limited environments, handheld ultrasound devices may offer a cost-effective alternative for procedural guidance. We aimed to compare the safety and diagnostic yield of PNKB performed with handheld versus high-end ultrasound systems.

Methods: Retrospective cohort study at Calderón General Teaching Hospital (2021–2023), including adult patients undergoing ultrasound-guided PNKB. Procedures were categorized by device: handheld (Butterfly iQ with iPhone) versus high-end (Philips Sparq). We collected data on demographics, biopsy indications, number of passes, glomerular yield, histological diagnosis, and complications. Diagnostic adequacy and safety outcomes were compared using chi-square and t tests.

Results: A total of 57 PNKBs were analyzed (22 handheld; 35 high-end). Patients were 56% female, with a mean age of 33.8 ± 12.7 years. The average number of glomeruli obtained per core was 15.7 ± 8.1 . Overall, 82.5% of procedures were complication-free; 17.5% had minor complications (pain ≥ 12 h, hematoma, or macroscopic hematuria); and no significant complications occurred. Complication-free rates were similar between groups (handheld: 72.7% vs. high-end: 88.6%; $p = 0.39$). Diagnostic adequacy was achieved in 85.7% of biopsies, with no significant difference between handheld (81.8%) and high-end (88.2%; $p = 0.50$).

Conclusion: Handheld ultrasound-guided PNKB demonstrates safety and diagnostic yield comparable to those of high-end systems, offering a low-cost, effective alternative in resource-limited settings. Wider adoption may enhance access to renal biopsy without compromising quality or safety.

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Ultrasound Portable, Percutaneous renal biopsy, Resources limited, Profitability Diagnostic, Safety.

L Percutaneous renal biopsy (PRB) is an indispensable diagnostic tool in nephrology and is essential for histopathological classification, prognosis, and therapeutic planning for various glomerular and tubulointerstitial kidney diseases [1]. Traditionally, this procedure has been guided by high-end ultrasound (HEUS), which enables precise visualization of the renal parenchyma, thereby improving diagnostic performance and reducing complication rates [2]. However, access to these devices can be limited in healthcare facilities with scarce resources, especially in low- and middle-income countries, where technological availability is uneven.

In this context, handheld portable ultrasound scanner (held) ultrasound (EG-P) devices have emerged as promising alternatives. These devices, based on low-cost, highly portable ultrasound technology, have shown encouraging results in various clinical settings, from pulmonary assessment to the identification of abdominal or cardiac abnormalities [2-4]. Their application in interventional procedures, such as bi-respiratory surgery (BRS), has sparked growing interest because of their potential to democratize access to advanced diagnostic techniques without compromising safety or efficacy.

Recent studies have shown that handheld ultrasound systems can provide adequate image quality for guiding procedures such as paracentesis, thoracentesis, and even renal punctures, provided that they are used by trained personnel [5, 6]. However, evidence regarding their specific utility in performing native renal biopsies remains limited and poorly systematized, particularly in settings where their implementation would have a greater impact.

This study aims to compare the safety and diagnostic performance of biorespiratory biopsies guided by handheld ultrasound and high-end ultrasound systems in a secondary-level hospital in Ecuador. This comparison could have relevant implications for nephrology practice in resource-limited countries, where the incorporation of accessible, efficient tools is urgently needed to close gaps in the timely diagnosis of kidney diseases [7].

Materials and methods

Studio design

This was an observational, cross-sectional study. The source is retrospective.

Scenery

This study was conducted in the nephrology department of the Calderón General Teaching Hospital, a Ministry of Public Health facility in Quito, Ecuador. The study period was from January 1, 2021, to December 31, 2023.

Participants

Historical records of adult patients aged 18 years or older who underwent conventional renal biopsy were included. No records were excluded. The group that underwent the procedure guided by handheld ultrasound was compared with the group guided by conventional ultrasound (control group).

Variables

The sociodemographic variables included age, sex, comorbidities, indication for renal biopsy, number of punctures, percentage of adequate sample, glomerular count, and histological diagnosis. The objective variables were the presence of complications —pain for more than 12 hours, hematuria for more than 24 hours, and hematomas.

Data sources/measurements

BRP indications

They were established according to the recommendations contained in the usual clinical guidelines and included the following: 1) nephrotic syndrome (NS): proteinuria ≥ 3.5 g/24 h with hypoalbuminemia; 2) prolonged acute renal failure of unknown origin (> 3 weeks); 3) persistent urinary abnormalities: the presence of microhematuria in the urinary sediment maintained over time (more than 3 determinations) with other causes of microhematuria excluded (lithiasis, infection, etc.); 4) proteinuria > 1 g/24 with suspected glomerular etiology; and 5) lupus with proteinuria ≥ 500 mg/24 hours.

Biopsy procedure and postbiopsy monitoring

Before the procedure, the following methods were performed: 1) laboratory tests, including complete blood count, coagulation studies, urea and creatinine, elemental and microscopic urine analysis, blood group and Rh factor; and 2) renal ultrasound.

BRP was performed in patients without absolute contraindications, with standard or correctable coagulation tests, blood pressures below 160/90 mmHg, hematocrit values equal to or greater than 30, and without the use of antiplatelet or anticoagulant drugs (the withdrawal of these medications was carried out according to usual recommendations).

All percutaneous renal biopsies were performed by nephrologists with the patient in the prone position, guided by real-time ultrasound, accessing the lower pole of the left kidney. In cases of anatomical difficulties on that side, a percutaneous renal biopsy was performed on the lower pole of the right kidney. The procedure was performed using 16- or 18-gauge semiautomatic needles, 10-15 cm in length, to obtain two renal tissue cores via a maximum of 4 punctures.



Two types of ultrasound equipment were used throughout the study. In the initial phase, a Philips Sparq ultrasound scanner (high-end, EG-A) was used (Figure 1). In contrast, in later stages, a portable ultrasound scanner (Butterfly IQ, EG-P) connected to an iPhone was used. The change in device type was due to logistical considerations and technological availability at different points in the study.

The BRPs were processed in the Synlab laboratory for study via optical microscopy and immunofluorescence.

Following the procedure, patients remained hospitalized for 24 hours in the supine position under strict bed rest, with vital signs and urine output monitored. Twenty-four hours after the biopsy, a complete blood count and bedside ultrasound were performed. Patients with favorable progression were discharged.

Figure 1. Renal biopsy performed with handheld portable ultrasound.



Biases

The surveys were administered in a standardized manner by the principal investigator via a preestablished guide approved in the research protocol. The data were independently reviewed by two researchers and recorded in duplicate. Only records with complete agreement were included. Clear definitions of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, as well as obtaining a recent clinical history, helped minimize selection and information bias.

Study size

The sample was selected via convenience sampling to recruit adult patients who had undergone a renal biopsy during the study period, meeting the inclusion criteria.

Quantitative variables

The results for ordinal variables are presented as frequencies and percentages. The results for the scale variables are presented as averages. Scale variables were not converted into quantitative variables.

Statistical analysis

Medical records were reviewed to collect data on the patients' demographic and clinical characteristics, the details of the procedure (biopsied kidney, number of punctures), the representativeness of the sample, the histopathological diagnosis, and the complications associated with the biopsy.

The complications associated with BRP were classified as follows: 1) Major: When blood transfusion and/or surgery were performed, nephrectomy, arteriography, embolization, or death were needed. 2) Minor: a decrease in hemoglobin >1 g/L without the need for blood transfusion or other endovascular or surgical techniques.

To compare qualitative variables between groups, the chi-square test was used. To analyze differences in the means of quantitative variables between groups, Student's t-test for independent samples was used. Statistical analysis was performed via Microsoft Excel 2013 and SPSS 15.



Results

Participants

There were 22 patients in the portable ultrasound group (ECO-P), and 35 patients underwent high-end ultrasound (ECO-AG).

Characteristics of the study population

In both groups, age was similarly distributed, with a mean age of approximately 30 years. In the high-end ultrasound group, there was a greater proportion of men (27.3%) than in the low-end ultrasound group (54.3%) ($P = 0.045$). The most common comorbidity and indication was the presence of systemic lupus erythematosus (Table 1).

Characteristics of renal biopsy samples and histology

In both groups, the left kidney was the preferred biopsy site, with more than 95% of samples obtained from that kidney. The number of punctures performed in both groups was 2, with adequate sampling rates of 81.8% in the ECO-P group and 88.2% in the ECO-AG group ($P=0.50$). The histological results are presented in Table 2. Lupus nephritis was the most common diagnosis in both groups, followed by membranous nephropathy and immunoglobulin A nephropathy. The histologically inadequate sample rate was 4.5% in the ECO-P group and 2.9% in the ECO-AG group, with no statistically significant difference.

Table 1. Baseline characteristics of the biopsied patient groups .

Category	ECO-P n=22	ECO-AG n=35	P
Age	39.2(14.0)	30.5 (10.7)	0.097
Sex-Male	6 (27.3%)	19 (54.3%)	0.045
Comorbidities			
Hypertension	1 (4.5%)	11 (32.4%)	
Diabetes mellitus	0	1 (2.9%)	
Coronary artery disease	0	1 (2.9%)	
Hypothyroidism	2 (9.1%)	1 (2.9%)	
Thrombocytopenic purpura	0	4 (11.8%)	0.098
Other autoimmune diseases	1 (4.5%)	1 (2.9%)	
Liver disease	1 (4.5%)	1 (2.9%)	
Neoplasms	1 (4.5%)	0	
Lupus	12 (54.5%)	10 (28.6%)	0.05
Indication for renal biopsy			
Nephrotic syndrome	7 (31.8%)	18 (51.4%)	
Nonnephrotic proteinuria	1 (4.5%)	1 (2.9%)	
Hematuria	2 (9.1%)	0	
Nonnephrotic proteinuria and hematuria	0	1 (2.9%)	0.269
Acute kidney injury	0	2 (5.7%)	
Nephritic syndrome	1 (4.5%)	2 (5.7%)	
Lupus with active urinary sediment	11 (50%)	11 (31.4%)	

Table 2. Sampling characteristics and histological results.

Category	ECO-P n=22 (%)	ECO-AG n=35 (%)	P
Kidney: Left (%)	21 (95.5%)	34 (97.1%)	0.736
Number of punctures (n)	2.3 (0.55%)	2.2 (0.47%)	0.329
Adequate sample (%)	18 (81.8%)	30 (88.2%)	0.50
Glomeruli (n)	15.4 (7.4%)	16.0 (8.6%)	0.264
Histological diagnosis			
Membranous	8 (36.4%)	7 (20%)	
Focal and segmental	0	1 (2.9%)	
IgA	2 (9.1%)	2 (5.7%)	
Membranoproliferative	0	2 (5.7%)	
Minimal changes	0	1 (2.9%)	
Lupus	11 (50%)	12 (34.3%)	0.087
Amyloidosis	0	1 (2.9%)	
diabetic CKD	0	1 (2.9%)	
Other	0	7 (20%)	
Inadequate sample	1 (4.5%)	1 (2.9%)	

CKD: Chronic kidney disease. IgA: Immunoglobulin A. ECO-P: Portable ultrasound. ECO-AG: High-end ultrasound.

Table 3. Complications of the procedure.

Category	ECO-P n=22 (%)	ECO-AG n=35 (%)	P
None	16 (72.7%)	31 (88.6%)	
Pain > 12 Hours	2 (9.1%)	2 (5.7%)	0.39
Hematuria > 24 h	1 (4.5%)	1 (2.9%)	
Hematoma	3 (13.6%)	1 (2.9%)	

No complications such as transfusions, urinary tract infection, puncture site infection, arteriovenous fistula, liver puncture, pancreatic puncture, spleen puncture, or need for invasive procedures were recorded. ECO-P: Portable ultrasound. ECO-AG: High-end ultrasound.

Complications of the procedure

There were no differences in complications between patients who underwent the procedure with portable ultrasound and those who underwent it with high-gamut ultrasound. There were 6 (27.3%) complications in the portable ultrasound group and 4 (12.9%) in the high-gamut ultrasound group ($P = 0.126$) (Table 3).



Discussion

Advances in the miniaturization, portability, and accessibility of ultrasound equipment are rapidly transforming this tool into an immediate diagnostic modality increasingly integrated into everyday medical practice. In clinical nephrology, bedside ultrasound with portable devices has demonstrated significant benefits for both nephrologists and their patients. Its use helps reduce care fragmentation, minimizes discomfort associated with patient transfer, shortens diagnostic times, and facilitates the performance of interventional procedures in non-conventional settings [8, 9].

In this context, the present study aimed to evaluate the safety and diagnostic cost-effectiveness of percutaneous renal biopsy guided by portable ultrasound in a single institution.

Our findings suggest that handheld portable ultrasound systems for percutaneous renal biopsies are a safe and effective alternative to high-end ultrasound systems, especially in technologically limited settings. The absence of significant complications and the similar diagnostic yields between the two groups reinforce the feasibility of using portable devices in secondary and tertiary hospital settings.

The diagnostic yield of 85.7% in our study falls within the range reported in the literature (80–95%) for image-guided biopsy of renal parenchyma (BRP) under optimal conditions [10–12]. Despite the less sophisticated technology of ultrasound-guided biopsy, adequate visualization of the renal parenchyma and an acceptable rate of representative sampling were achieved, consistent with previous findings validating the use of portable ultrasound in other image-guided procedures.

The number of glomeruli obtained in both groups in our study was consistent with that reported in the literature. Previous studies have shown that real-time ultrasound guidance allows the extraction of 11.6–21.6 glomeruli per biopsy [13]. In particular, one study found that nephrologists, on average, obtain 16–18 glomeruli, whereas interventional radiologists obtain 15–21.

The complication rate in our cohort was low, with only minor adverse events reported in both groups, and no statistically significant differences were observed between them. Compared to previously reported rates, the significant complication rate in our study was lower than the previously described range (0.5% to 6%), while the minor complication rate was similar [15–17].

A systematic review of 87 studies, including 118,604 renal biopsies from native kidneys, reported the following complication rates: pain at the puncture site (4.3%), macroscopic hematuria (3.5%), hematomas (11%), need for transfusion (1.6%), need for intervention to control bleeding (0.3%), nephrectomy (0.01%), and mortality (0.06%) [18].

On the other hand, a second study that analyzed 52,138 percutaneous renal biopsies reported a severe bleeding rate of 5%, a transfusion requirement of 5%, a need for angiographic intervention of 0.4%, a nephrectomy rate of 0.1%, and an overall mortality rate of 1% [19].

The rates of minor complications observed in these cohorts align with those reported in our analysis, further supporting the procedure's safety. Importantly, in our study, no patients required transfusion, surgical intervention, or radiological procedures, which affirms the safety of percutaneous renal biopsy regardless of the ultrasound machine used.

Although this study was not designed to prove superiority, it provides evidence supporting the noninferiority of portable ultrasound in terms of safety and diagnostic performance. This finding could have important implications in resource-limited countries, where investing in portable technologies might improve access to essential diagnostic procedures, such as renal biopsy, helping to reduce disparities in renal care. The main limitations of this study include its retrospective design, small sample size, and the fact that all procedures were carried out by trained nephrologists, which may not be applicable in other settings without specialized training. Future prospective studies with larger, multicenter samples could provide more substantial evidence regarding the use of portable ultrasound in renal biopsies and other nephrological procedures.

Conclusion

Handheld portable ultrasound scanners represent a practical, safe, and potentially cost-effective tool, comparable to high-end ultrasound-guided renal biopsy procedures, with relevant implications for expanding access to histopathological diagnoses in nephrology.

Abbreviations

BRP: Percutaneous renal biopsy.
ECO-P: portable ultrasound.
ECO-AG: high-end ultrasound.

Supplementary information

The supplementary materials have not been included.

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Authors' contributions

Cristina Chediak: Conceptualization, data curation, research, visualization, original draft writing.

Adela Anguisaca: Conceptualization, data curation, research, visualization, writing - original draft.

Mayra Oñate: Conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, project management, software, validation, visualization, writing - review and editing.

Belén Larco: Conceptualization, formal analysis, methodology, project management, resources, software, supervision, validation, writing, review and editing.

Meri Orma: Conceptualization, data curation, research, visualization, original draft writing.

Juan Santacruz: Conceptualization, formal analysis, methodology, project management, resources, software, supervision, validation, writing, review and editing.

All the authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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**Availability of data or materials**

Not applicable.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Statements**Ethics committee approval and consent to participate**

The Bioethics Committee approved the study for Health Research of the Calderón General Teaching Hospital of the Ministry of Public Health, Quito, Ecuador.

Consent for publication

This does not apply when specific patient images, radiographs, or photographs are not published.

Author information

Not declared.

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