International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Biomarkers Predicting Mortality in Sepsis: Comparative Outcomes of Scrub Typhus and Leptospirosis

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Abstract

Sepsis is a major global health burden, with zoonotic infections such as scrub typhus and leptospirosis contributing significantly to mortality in tropical regions. Leptospirosis and scrub typhus are important causes of acute undifferentiated febrile illness and are associated with significant morbidity and mortality. Early diagnosis and timely recognition of disease severity are crucial for improving clinical outcomes. This review examines biomarkers for mortality prediction in sepsis arising from these pathogens and compares their clinical outcomes. Established tools like the Sequential Organ Failure Assessment (SOFA) score, along with biomarkers including lactate, procalcitonin (PCT), C-reactive protein (CRP), and composite ratios such as lactate-to-albumin ratio (LAR), demonstrate strong prognostic utility. Scrub typhus typically exhibits case-fatality of 1–30% with appropriate treatment (untreated mortality has been reported as high as 60%), often linked to eschar, myocarditis, and ARDS, whereas leptospirosis (particularly Weil's disease) shows higher mortality (up to 50% in severe cases) driven by renal failure, jaundice, and pulmonary hemorrhage. Differences in organ involvement influence biomarker profiles, with leptospirosis associated with more pronounced renal and hepatic dysfunction. Early integration of biomarkers and scoring systems can optimize triage and management in resource-limited settings. This synthesis highlights pathophysiological distinctions, diagnostic challenges, and implications for clinical practice.

Keywords: Sepsis; mortality biomarkers; scrub typhus; leptospirosis; SOFA score; lactate; hyperuricemia; pentraxin-3; C-reactive protein; procalcitonin; polymerase chain reaction; QuickLepto; prognostic biomarkers; disease severity.

Introduction

Sepsis, characterised by life-threatening organ dysfunction due to a dysregulated host response to infection, remains a leading cause of death worldwide, with case-fatality rates ranging from 11–26% depending on severity and setting. In endemic tropical areas, scrub typhus caused by Orientia tsutsugamushi and leptospirosis due to Leptospira species are prominent ethologies of acute febrile illness

progressing to sepsis. These zoonoses overlap clinically with fever, myalgia, thrombocytopenia, and multi-organ involvement, posing diagnostic and management challenges.

Scrub typhus is transmitted by larval trombiculid mites (chiggers) and is prevalent in the Asia-Pacific region. Case-fatality is typically 1–30% with prompt antibiotic treatment, but untreated cases carry mortality rates of up to 60%, influenced by strain virulence, patient age, and timely antibiotics. Leptospirosis, a water- or soil-borne spirochetal infection, has an estimated global burden of over 1 million cases and approximately 59,000 deaths annually, with higher fatality in severe pulmonary hemorrhage syndrome or Weil's disease. Both infections present with non-specific clinical manifestations, making early diagnosis challenging and often leading to delayed treatment. If left untreated, these diseases can progress rapidly to severe complications, including acute kidney injury, acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), hepatic dysfunction, neurological involvement, shock, and multiple organ dysfunction syndrome (MODS), resulting in increased mortality. Prognostic biomarkers and scores are essential for risk stratification. The SOFA score assesses organ dysfunction across six systems and correlates strongly with mortality (AUC often >0.90). Additional markers such as serum lactate (reflecting tissue hypoperfusion), serum uric acid, PCT, CRP, and novel indices like LAR, CRP-to-albumin ratio (CAR), and neutrophil percentage-to-albumin ratio (NPAR) enhance predictive accuracy when combined. Pentraxin-3 (PTX3), along with molecular diagnostic techniques such as polymerase chain reaction (PCR), have shown promise in improving diagnostic accuracy and predicting disease severity. Additionally, prognostic scoring systems such as QuickLepto (a bedside score combining clinical and basic laboratory variables to flag leptospirosis patients at high risk of death) have demonstrated utility in identifying patients at high risk of adverse outcomes.

Comparative analyses indicate leptospirosis often presents greater renal and hepatic impairment, leading to higher SOFA scores and mortality compared to scrub typhus. Co-infections with other pathogens further complicate outcomes. This review synthesizes current evidence on biomarkers and outcomes to inform clinical decision-making in high-burden areas.

Methods

A narrative synthesis was performed drawing from peer-reviewed literature (primarily 2018–2026) sourced via PubMed, Scopus, and regional databases. A review of published literature was conducted to identify studies evaluating diagnostic modalities, laboratory biomarkers, clinical predictors, and prognostic scoring systems in patients with leptospirosis and scrub typhus.

Search terms included combinations of "sepsis biomarkers," "mortality prediction," "scrub typhus," "leptospirosis," "SOFA," "lactate," and "procalcitonin." Inclusion focused on studies reporting prognostic performance (e.g., AUC, odds ratios) or comparative clinical data. Illustrative cohort comparisons (n≈250 per group) were derived from aggregated real-world patterns in endemic settings for modeling purposes rather than from a single pooled dataset — the figures in Tables 1 and 2 should be read as representative, not as a meta-analytic result. Statistical concepts such as ROC analysis and logistic regression informed interpretation. No primary data collection occurred; thus, ethical approval was not applicable.

Results

Hyperuricemia has been associated with severe scrub typhus [19], and early measurement of serum uric acid may help identify patients who require close monitoring and aggressive management. Elevated C-reactive protein (CRP) and procalcitonin (PCT) levels may aid in the diagnosis of rickettsial infections

and predict the response to doxycycline therapy [20]. In leptospirosis, a combination of polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and serological testing on the initial clinical sample, irrespective of the duration of illness, improves early diagnosis and reduces the risk of misdiagnosis [21]. Advanced age, chronic alcoholism, high leptospiremic burden, hemodynamic instability, leucocytosis, pulmonary involvement, acute kidney injury, and multiple organ dysfunction syndrome have been associated with increased mortality.

Elevated pentraxin-3 (PTX3) levels have also been associated with severe disease and poor clinical outcomes in leptospirosis [23].

Additional predictors of mortality in leptospirosis include oliguria, hyperkalemia, elevated creatinine and bilirubin levels, altered mental status, delayed antibiotic therapy, and a high aspartate aminotransferase/alanine aminotransferase ratio (AAR) [24,26].

The QuickLepto score has demonstrated good predictive accuracy for mortality and has outperformed the SPIRO and qSOFA scores in patients with leptospirosis.

Patients presenting with organ dysfunction or requiring intensive care have significantly higher odds of mortality.

Pulmonary involvement at admission is a strong predictor of death in severe leptospirosis [27]. In scrub typhus, respiratory failure, renal dysfunction, neurological involvement, shock, mechanical ventilation, severe anemia, elevated liver enzymes, thrombocytopenia, ocular manifestations, and acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS) are consistently associated with severe disease and increased mortality [29,31,32].

Table 1: Comparative Clinical Characteristics and Outcomes (Illustrative Cohort Synthesis). Values are illustrative/synthesized to represent typical patterns reported across endemic-region studies; they are not raw output from a single pooled cohort or meta-analysis.

Parameter	**Scrub Typhus (n=250)**	**Leptospirosis (n=250)**	**P-value (approx.)**
Mean Age (years ± SD)	42 ± 14	48 ± 16	0.02
Male (%)	62%	68%	0.15
In-hospital Mortality (%)	12%	28%	<0.01
Admission SOFA Score (mean ± SD)	8.2 ± 3.5	11.5 ± 4.2	<0.001
Acute Kidney Injury (%)	35%	62%	<0.001
ARDS/Pneumonitis (%)	25%	20%	0.25
Thrombocytopenia (%)	70%	65%	0.28
Jaundice (%)	28%	55%	<0.01

Table 2: Prognostic Performance of Selected Biomarkers and Scores for 28-Day Mortality (AUC Values). As above, AUC values are illustrative estimates synthesized from patterns reported in the literature, not a single pooled analysis.

Biomarker/Score	**Scrub Typhus AUC**	**Leptospirosis AUC**	**Overall Sepsis AUC**
SOFA Score	0.91	0.93	0.92
Serum Lactate	0.78	0.85	0.82
Procalcitonin	0.72	0.75	0.74

Lactate-to-Albumin Ratio (LAR)	0.82	0.87	0.85
CRP-to-Albumin Ratio (CAR)	0.68	0.71	0.70
APACHE II	0.85	0.88	0.87

Higher values in leptospirosis reflect greater organ dysfunction burden. Combined models incorporating SOFA + LAR approached AUC 0.93, comparable or superior to standalone traditional scores.

Discussion

Sepsis secondary to scrub typhus and leptospirosis remains a major cause of morbidity and mortality in tropical regions because of delayed diagnosis, overlapping clinical manifestations, and rapid progression to multiorgan dysfunction. Although both infections commonly present as acute undifferentiated febrile illness, the present review demonstrates important differences in disease severity and outcomes. Leptospirosis was consistently associated with greater renal and hepatic dysfunction, higher SOFA scores, and increased mortality compared with scrub typhus. These findings are consistent with reports from endemic regions, emphasizing that early recognition of organ dysfunction is critical for improving outcomes rather than relying solely on etiological diagnosis alone.

The Sequential Organ Failure Assessment (SOFA) score demonstrated the strongest prognostic performance among the evaluated tools. Unlike isolated laboratory markers, SOFA integrates dysfunction across multiple organ systems and therefore more accurately reflects the complex pathophysiology of sepsis. The Sepsis-3 consensus established organ dysfunction as the defining feature of sepsis [33], while subsequent prospective studies confirmed the ability of SOFA to predict short-term mortality in septic patients. Serial SOFA assessment may therefore be more informative than a single admission score by identifying progressive organ dysfunction despite appropriate therapy.

Serum lactate remains a well-established biomarker of disease severity because elevated concentrations reflect impaired tissue perfusion, mitochondrial dysfunction, and metabolic stress. More recently, the lactate-to-albumin ratio (LAR) has demonstrated superior prognostic performance by integrating metabolic derangement with hypoalbuminemia, a marker of systemic inflammation and reduced physiological reserve [34]. Because serum lactate and albumin are inexpensive and routinely available investigations, LAR may represent a practical prognostic tool in resource-limited settings.

Inflammatory biomarkers such as procalcitonin (PCT), C-reactive protein (CRP), and pentraxin-3 (PTX3) provide complementary prognostic information but should be interpreted alongside clinical severity scores. PCT is relatively more specific for bacterial infection than CRP, whereas CRP primarily reflects systemic inflammation and lacks disease specificity; its diagnostic and prognostic performance also varies in rickettsial infections such as scrub typhus, where the inflammatory response differs from typical bacterial sepsis, so neither marker should be interpreted in isolation. Among the emerging biomarkers, PTX3 has shown particular promise because it is released directly from endothelial cells and activated immune cells during inflammation, reflecting endothelial dysfunction more accurately than CRP. Wagenaar et al. [23] reported significantly higher PTX3 concentrations among patients with severe leptospirosis and a strong association with mortality, and subsequent systematic reviews have found PTX3 to consistently outperform conventional inflammatory markers in predicting adverse sepsis outcomes [35]. Nevertheless, limited assay availability and the absence of standardized cut-off values currently restrict its routine clinical application. Overall, combining inflammatory biomarkers with SOFA and lactate-based indices appears to improve prognostic accuracy compared with individual biomarkers alone.

The higher mortality observed in leptospirosis is likely explained by differences in pathogenesis. Widespread endothelial injury, severe acute kidney injury, hepatic dysfunction, pulmonary hemorrhage, and circulatory shock contribute substantially to poor outcomes; Goswami et al. [24] identified pulmonary involvement, oliguria, hyperkalemia, elevated serum creatinine, and altered mental status as significant predictors of death in leptospirosis, while Wickramasinghe et al. [12] highlighted delayed diagnosis and high leptospiremic burden as additional determinants of poor outcome. In contrast, scrub typhus predominantly causes disseminated vasculitis leading to complications such as myocarditis, encephalitis, and acute respiratory distress syndrome via endothelial infection with Orientia tsutsugamushi. Varghese et al. [30] demonstrated that early recognition and timely initiation of doxycycline substantially reduced mortality, whereas delayed treatment was consistently associated with progression to ARDS, myocarditis, and multiorgan failure; Goyal et al. [28] similarly identified respiratory failure, shock, acute kidney injury, thrombocytopenia, and elevated hepatic transaminases as independent predictors of mortality among hospitalized scrub typhus patients. Although both infections may progress to multiorgan dysfunction, prompt initiation of doxycycline in scrub typhus frequently results in rapid clinical improvement, highlighting the importance of early diagnosis and empirical therapy in endemic areas.

From a clinical perspective, integrating readily available biomarkers such as serum lactate, albumin, CRP, and PCT with structured clinical scoring systems including the SOFA score offers a practical approach for early risk stratification, particularly in healthcare settings where advanced molecular diagnostics are unavailable. Biomarkers should complement rather than replace clinical assessment, and serial measurements are likely to provide greater prognostic value than isolated baseline values by reflecting treatment response and disease progression.

Despite encouraging evidence, current studies remain heterogeneous with respect to patient populations, biomarker assays, diagnostic criteria, and timing of sample collection. Most available studies are retrospective, single-center investigations with relatively small sample sizes, and differences in healthcare infrastructure, antimicrobial availability, and intensive care resources across endemic regions may influence mortality independent of biomarker performance. Current biomarkers should therefore complement rather than replace comprehensive clinical assessment and serial evaluation of organ dysfunction.

Future research should prioritize large, prospective, multicenter studies evaluating standardized biomarker panels specific to tropical sepsis, validating biomarker-guided risk stratification and establishing standardized diagnostic thresholds. Integration of conventional biomarkers with emerging indicators of endothelial dysfunction, molecular diagnostics, and machine-learning prediction models may improve early risk stratification, and validation of inexpensive indices such as LAR in both scrub typhus and leptospirosis could provide practical tools for the resource-limited settings where the burden of tropical sepsis remains greatest.

Conclusion

SOFA score, lactate-derived indices, and inflammatory biomarkers effectively predict mortality in sepsis due to scrub typhus and leptospirosis, with leptospirosis demonstrating higher severity and distinct organ profiles. Routine integration of these tools, combined molecular and serological diagnosis, and prompt recognition of clinical and laboratory predictors of severity, may facilitate risk stratification and improve outcomes in endemic regions. Prospective, multicenter validation studies are needed before these composite scores can be recommended for routine triage.

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