Guidelines for the treatment of osteoarthritis

Guidelines for the treatment of osteoarthritis (OA) have several purposes, but a major one relates to its use by regulatory or medical insurance agencies that use it to help guide their response to requests for drugs to treat patients. Data have recently been published which record the efficacy of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) over paracetamol (acetaminophen) and report patients’ preferences for NSAIDs rather than paracetamol in the treatment of OA. Furthermore, inflammation is a common accompaniment of moderate to severe OA. Therefore it would seem appropriate to consider the use of NSAIDs as the primary treatment in the group of patients with OA who have moderate to severe pain or lack of inflammation as part of their disease. The EULAR Guidelines state that paracetamol is the first line of treatment for all patients with OA, despite the recent evidence that NSAIDs are more efficacious than paracetamol and that paracetamol is associated with more gastrointestinal toxicity than was previously thought.

Would it not be more appropriate to suggest that patients who have moderate to severe pain and/or OA with inflammatory components be given NSAIDs as the first line of treatment, leaving paracetamol for symptomatic use in those patients with less degrees of pain or lack of overt inflammation?

D E Forst
Director of Arthritis Clinical Research, Virginia Mason Research Center, Seattle, Washington, USA

J R Caldwell
Florida Arthritis and Allergy Institute, Daytona Beach, Florida, USA

References


If you have a burning desire to respond to a paper published in the Annals of the Rheumatic Diseases, why not make use of our “rapid response” option?

To use our website (www.annrheumdis.com), find the paper that interests you, and send your response via email by clicking on the “eLetters” option in the box at the top right hand corner.

Providing it isn’t libellous or obscene, it will be posted within seven days. You can retrieve it by clicking on “read eLetters” on our homepage.

The editors will decide as before whether also to publish it in a future paper issue.


Authors’ response

The pros and cons of oral non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and paracetamol are certainly of interest and relevance to the management of osteoarthritis (OA). However, the following points are relevant to the suggestions contained in Dr Forst’s letter:

1. The EULAR recommendations reflect an evidence based approach to key clinical questions. They clearly specify the end of 1998 as the cut off point, the relative risk of upper gastrointestinal complications, users of acetaminophen and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. Epidemiology (in press).

2. Again it is clearly stated in the EULAR document that the package of care offered to a patient with knee OA must take into account not only efficacy and side effects of individual interventions but also patient attitudes and preferences, comorbidity, concurrent drug treatment, costs, and availability. It will indeed be interesting to see if the EULAR Task Force do change their recommendations in the light of these recent data in the way suggested by Dr Forst. For example:

• In the recent study by Pincus it is noteworthy that although 57% of patients thought that Arthrotec was better than paracetamol, 20% thought that paracetamol was better and 22% reported no difference. In other words almost half the patients found no perceived benefit from Arthrotec. Side effects were significantly more common with Arthrotec. Furthermore, this was a short term study of six weeks. The few long term studies show that many patients stop taking NSAID—in one study only 15–20% of patients with OA continued their NSAID for one year.

• Traditional oral NSAIDs indeed kill a significant number of patients each year from gastrointestinal bleeding/perforation. Over half of the patients with symptomatic OA are in the high risk category for NSAID associated mortality (elderly, with comorbidity). Although there are now data that paracetamol may have a gastrointestinal risk, it is less than that caused by traditional NSAIDs. There are no renal or cardiovascular side effects from paracetamol, but there are from NSAIDs.

• NSAIDs remain expensive compared with paracetamol.

• Data show that NSAIDs (at least indometacin) may hasten cartilage and bone attrition—there are no data that paracetamol is such a negative agent. It is for reasons such as this that most doctors keep oral NSAIDs in reserve for patients in whom the safer and cheaper drug, paracetamol, has failed.

3. It is perhaps unfortunate that many of us get hung up on the order of drug selection. In practice, of course, most patients receive a package of care, not a single treatment. Many patients take both NSAIDs and paracetamol (often as self medication of over the counter drugs)—hopefuly in addition to exercise, weight reduction, pacing of activities, etc. The argument about “first use” is therefore irrelevant to most patients. Studies in few studies use a factorial design to better inform us of effect sizes of combined treatments. Few also examine predictors of response. These points are again made in the EULAR document.

4. We would take issue with the suggestion that the major purpose of “guidelines” is that they be used by regulatory or medical insurance agencies. This may be true in America but is not a rationale for producing recommendations in Europe. The objectives of the EULAR recommendations are clearly listed. They summarise evidence to help directly (not indirectly through agencies) guide decision making by...
practitioners and patients. They also highlight gaps in our knowledge and inform the future research agenda.

M Doherty
Academic Rheumatology, University of Nottingham, Clinical Sciences Building, City Hospital, Hucknall Road, Nottingham NG5 1PB, UK

MDougados
René Descartes University, Cochin Hospital, Department of Rheumatology, 27 rue de Faubourg Saint Jacques, 75014 Paris, France

Correspondence to: Professor M Doherty; Michael.Doherty@nottingham.ac.uk

Reference
4 Brandt KD, Bradley JD. Should the initial drug used to treat osteoarthritis pain be a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug? J Rheumatol 2001;28:467–73.

Salmonella arthritis
I was interested to read the “Lesson of the month” on salmonella arthritis in a 70 year old Afro-Caribbean man.¹ The discussion mentioned that male sex and pre-existing atherosclerosis are risk factors for salmonella arthritis and that the condition is extremely uncommon below the age of 50.

No mention was made of the possibility of sickle cell disease in this man. Sickle cell disease may be complicated by salmonella infection, rarely producing an osteomyelitis, and I should be interested to know if haemoglobin electrophoresis was carried out, whether in fact the sharp drop in haemoglobin might be accounted for by a sickle cell crisis.

A J Richards
Department of Rheumatology, Worthing Hospital, Worthing, W Sussex BN11 2OH, UK
Correspondence to: Dr A J Richards, Tony.Richards@wast.h-tr.shomes.nhs.uk

Reference

Author’s response
It is a valid point that sickle cell disease can be complicated by salmonella infection and as a sequel salmonella osteomyelitis. This usually follows a painful crisis, which is more common in male than female patients and has an increased incidence between the ages of 15 and 25. An episode of painful crisis lasting for more than two weeks and associated with a temperature of 38°C or more should raise the suspicion of osteomyelitis, and the most common organism is salmonella followed by Staphylococcus aureus. Radiological changes are often only apparent up to four weeks after the onset of illness. Salmonella infection is also recorded in young children with sickle cell disease and episodes of vascular occlusion affecting the bones of the hand and feet, leading to dactylitis. Blood cultures are therefore always indicated in dactylitis when associated with sickle cell disease, and salmonella infection as a complication is well documented.² Our patient did in fact have a haemoglobin electrophoresis carried out during his illness and this showed a normal adult haemoglobin pattern and no evidence of haemoglobinopa-thy.

R Mootoo
Rheumatology Department, Homerton Hospital, Homerton Row, London E9 6SR, UK

Reference

Rheumatic pneumonia
I read recently in the Annals a letter by Fuente et al on rheumatic pneumonia.³ Despite the authors stating that they had completely reviewed Spanish and English publications, an article by us published in 1995 was not included.⁴

Our article would have added to the information contained in the letter by Fuente et al because it described the case of a 3 year old girl (an uncommon age for the onset of rheumatic disease), in whom arthritis and carditis occurred together, with valvular sequelae (mitral insufficiency) that required surgical intervention a year later.

In Pernambuco, in the northeast of Brazil, which has serious socioeconomic problems, rheumatic fever is endemic among the poor, particularly in children and adolescents, causing early damage to mitral and aortic valves. Rheumatic pneumonia, though not uncommon, can be seen in about 2% of our acute cases, mostly recurrent, with severe concomitant valvulitises.

L R Saraiva
Department of Clinical Medicine, Hospital das Clinicas, Avenida Prof Moraes Rego, SN-50670-480, Recife, Pernambuco, Brasil

References

Authors’ response
We thank Dr Saraiva for his letter and think that the case reported is very interesting as they describe rheumatic pneumonia associated with mitral insufficiency at an unusually early age of onset in a region where rheumatic fever continues to be prevalent. This emphasises even more the rarity of this complication.

Unfortunately, we were unable to include the article in our review because it was not indexed in the bibliographic sources we used (Medline, Medline plus, and PubMed of the United States National Library of Medicine databases) and it was not referred to in the bibliography of papers reviewed in our article.

J de la Fuente, A Nodar
Intern Medical Service, Xeral-Cies Hospital, Vigo, Spain
A Fernández
Pneumology Service, Xeral-Cies Hospital
Correspondence to: Dr J de la Fuente, E M Veys

Reference

BOOK REVIEW

Conquering rheumatoid arthritis. The latest breakthroughs and treatments

Thomas Lee is a professor of microbiology and biotechnology and is also a patient with rheumatoid arthritis (RA). He has studied and read about rheumatic diseases, mainly about RA, and felt the need for a comprehensive work to explain to patients with RA more about the mechanism of their disease and current and future treatments. It is not meant for, and offers little new to, the professional reader. On the other hand, it may be too complicated for a patient without a medical background. Those targeted are also clearly American patients: prices are always given in US dollars, references are only to USA regulations and, moreover, the major part of research quoted was done in the USA.

The author first gives some definitions of rheumatic diseases, followed by chapters about immunology and the mechanisms of disease. A lot of attention is given to genes and their role in RA. Much seems to be expected from the human genome project and from genetic targeted treatments. A chapter is dedicated to bone marrow and stem cell transplantation. Though the author mentions the side effect of these treatments, he still considers them a “miracle”, giving, I fear, undue hope to patients. The next chapter gives a clear overview of the current treatments for RA and is followed by chapters about new treatments, clinical trials, and drugs in the pipeline. At the end useful websites are listed.

My main criticism is that it is too easy for professionals, but too difficult for patients without a medical background. While some chapters are clear, for instance those about treatments, others, or part of others, seem to be really difficult to understand for lay people. The information given is sometimes anecdotal, for instance, in the chapter about stem cell transplantation where there are no references. Only websites are given as references. These may be easily accessible, but I think classical referencing allows for easier checking of what is stated. Moreover, I fear that false hopes may be raised by describing some treatments that are still far from being used in practice.
29th Scandinavian Congress of Rheumatology
15–18 Aug 2002; Tromso, Norway
Contact: Hans Nossent, Department of Rheumatology, University Hospital Tromso, Norway
Tel: +47 776 27294
Fax: +47 776 27258
Email: 29scrr2002@rit.no or revhan@rit.no

24th Annual Meeting of the American Society for Bone and Mineral Research
20–24 Sep 2002; San Antonio, TX, USA
Contact: ASBMR, 2025 M Street, NW, Suite 800, Washington DC 20036-3309, USA
Tel: +1 202 367 1161
Fax: +1 202 857 1880
Email: asbmr@dc.sba.com

Translational Research in Autoimmunity
21–22 Sep 2002; Pavia, Italy
Contact: Organising secretariat: eventi S.R.L., Corso Cavour, 18/20 - 27100 Pavia, Italy
Email: tra@c20pr.com
Website: www.c20pr.com
Congress website: www.medicine.ucsd.edu/ albania/2001/congress

OsteoArthritis Research Society International (OARSI) World Congress
22–25 Sep 2002; Sydney, Australia
Contact: OsteoArthritis Research Society International (OARSI), 2025 M Street, NW, Suite 800, Washington DC 20036, USA
Tel: +1 202 367 1177
Fax: +1 202 367 2177
Email: oarsi@oarsi.org
Website: www.oarsi.org

Third International Conference on Familial Mediterranean Fever and Hereditary Inflammatory Disorders
23–27 September 2002; La Grande Motte, France
Contact: Dr Isabelle Toutou, Laboratoire de Genetique Moleculaire et Chromosomique, Hopital A de Villeneuve, Montpellier, France
Tel: +33 4 67 13 58 95
Fax:  33 4 67 33 58 62
Email: isabelle.toutou@igh.cnrs.fr
Website: www.congres.igh.cnrs.fr.FMF/2002

10th International Congress on Antiphospholipid Antibodies
29 Sep–3 Oct 2002; Sicily, Italy
Contact: Secretariat, 10th International Congress on Antiphospholipid Antibodies, c/o Kenes International, PO Box 50006, Tel Aviv 61500, Israel
Tel: 972 3 5140018/9
Fax: 972 3 5140077 or 972 3 5172484
Email: aps@kenes.com
Website: www.kenes.com/aps

Third international Congress on Spondyloarthropathies
2–5 Oct 2002, Gent, Belgium
Topics covered will be:
• Innate immunity

• Genetics and HLA-B27
• Animal models and pathogenesis
• Clinical research and therapy

Contact: Organisation and secretariat, Medi- congress, Waalpoel 28–34, B-9960 Asenvede, Belgium
Tel: +32 9 344 39 59
Fax: +32 9 344 40 10
Email: congresses@medicongress.com
Website: www.medicongress.com

7th International Conference on Eicosanoids and Other Bioactive Lipids in Cancer, Inflammation and Related Diseases
14–17 Oct 2002; Nashville, Tennessee, USA
Contact: Lawrence J Marnett, Biochemistry Department, Vanderbilt University, School of Medicine, Nashville, TN 37232-0146, USA
Tel: (615) 343 7329
Fax: (615) 343 7534
Website: www.eicosanoids.science.eayne.edu

3rd International Conference on Sex Hormones, Pregnancy, and the Rheumatic Diseases
21–24 Oct 2002; New Orleans, USA
Contact: Anne Parke
Tel: 866 679 8190
Fax: 860 679 1287
Email: parke@nsu.uchc.edu

66th American College of Rheumatology AGM
25–29 Oct 2002; New Orleans, USA
Contact: ACR, Ronald F Olejko, Director of Conferences and Meetings, 1800 Century Place, Suite 250, Atlanta, Georgia 30045–4300, USA
Tel: +1 404 633 3777
Fax: +1 404 633 1870
Email: acr@rheumatology.org
Website: www.rheumatology.org

Third International Meeting on Social and Economic Aspects of Osteoporosis and Osteoarthritis
7–9 November, 2002; Barcelona, Spain
Contact: Yolande Piette Communication, Boulevard Kleyer 108, 4000 Liège, Belgium
Tel: 32 4 254 12 25
Fax: 32 4 254 12 90
Email: ypc@compuserve.com

Certifying Examination in Pediatric Rheumatology
18 Nov 2002
Contact: American Board of Pediatrics, 111 Sil- ver Cedar Court, Chapel Hill, NC 27514-1513, USA
Tel: 919 929 0461
Fax: 919 918 7114 or 919 929 9255
Website: www.abp.org

Future EULAR congresses
18–21 June 2003; EULAR 2003 Lisbon, Portugal
9–12 June 2004; EULAR 2004 Berlin, Germany
8–11 June 2005; EULAR 2005 Vienna, Austria
21–24 June 2006; EULAR 2006 Amsterdam, The Netherlands