Safety of biological therapies following rituximab treatment in rheumatoid arthritis patients

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ABSTRACT
Objective: To assess the safety of biological disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARD) in rheumatoid arthritis (RA) patients following rituximab.

Methods: RA patients who participated in an international rituximab clinical trial programme were included. Patients who had received one or more rituximab courses and entered safety follow-up (SFU) were permitted additional biological DMARD. Serious infection events (SIE) were collected.

Results: Of 185 of 2578 patients who entered SFU and received another biological DMARD, 88.6% had peripheral B-cell depletion at the time of initiation of another biological agent. Thirteen SIE (6.99 events/100 patient-years) occurred following rituximab but before another biological DMARD and 10 SIE (5.49 events/100 patient-years) occurred following another biological DMARD. SIE were of typical type and severity for RA patients. 153 had received one or more tumour necrosis factor inhibitor(s). No fatal or opportunistic infections occurred.

Conclusions: In this analysis, treatment with biological DMARD after rituximab was not associated with an increased serious infection rate. Sample size with limited follow-up restricts definitive conclusions.

RESULTS

Patients
At data cut-off (November 2007), 2578 patients (5013 patient-years) had been treated with one or more courses of rituximab within the clinical trial programme, with many patients receiving multiple courses. A total of 185 patients received subsequent treatment with biological DMARD. Of the 185 patients, 153 (81%) received TNF inhibitors (etanercept, infliximab and adalimumab) as their

Safety
SIE were predefined as infections that required intravenous antibiotics or met the regulatory criteria for a serious adverse event, in which at least one of the following applied: required inpatient hospitalisation or prolongation of an existing hospitalisation; were immediately life-threatening; resulted in persistent or significant disability or incapacity; were medically significant, when an intervention was required to prevent one of the previously mentioned outcomes; or were fatal.4 The rates (events per 100 patient-years) of SIE while on rituximab but before the initiation of a biological DMARD were calculated and compared with rates after initiating a biological DMARD.
biological DMARD following rituximab (including three patients who had taken other biological agents before the TNF inhibitor), 25 patients received abatacept, nine received anakinra (including two patients who subsequently took a TNF inhibitor) and one received natalizumab in a clinical trial and then was subsequently treated with etanercept. The demographic and disease characteristics of this population are summarised in table 1.

The median time from the last dose of rituximab to the first biological DMARD was 7 months (range 0.5–57 months), with a mean of 9 months (SD 6). The median follow-up time after the receipt of the subsequent biological agent was 11 months (range 0–45 months) and the mean was 12 months (SD 9). The median time to the receipt of another biological DMARD following rituximab treatment, but before the TNF inhibitor, was 6.99 events/100 patient-years; 95% CI 4.06 to 12.03) during treatment with etanercept.

Three patients experienced two SIE. One patient had two cases of pneumonia (before and after starting anakinra). A second patient had pneumonia before starting adalimumab and a UTI after starting adalimumab. A third patient experienced bronchitis and one case of UTI before starting etanercept.

Overall, the infections were variable and typical for RA patients. All but three of the patients with SIE were also taking concomitant glucocorticoids. There were no opportunistic or fatal infections.

### Table 1 Baseline demographic and disease characteristics of patients treated with biological DMARD following rituximab treatment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic*</th>
<th>All patients receiving another biological DMARD after rituximab (n = 185)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age, years (SD)</td>
<td>51.2 (12.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female, n (%)</td>
<td>145 (76.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RA disease duration, years (SD)</td>
<td>11.9 (9.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous DMARD,† (n (SD)</td>
<td>4.0 (2.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous TNF inhibitors, n (SD)</td>
<td>1.3 (0.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swollen joint count, n (SD)</td>
<td>24.5 (13.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tender joint count, n (SD)</td>
<td>37.8 (15.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-reactive protein, mg/dl (SD)</td>
<td>3.7 (4.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAS28-ESR (SD)</td>
<td>7.0 (9.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Mean values are reported when applicable. †Excludes methotrexate. DAS28, disease activity score based on 28 joints; DMARD, disease-modifying antirheumatic drug; ESR, erythrocyte sedimentation rate; RA, rheumatoid arthritis; TNF, tumour necrosis factor.

### Table 2 Serious infection rate in patients who received treatment with another biological DMARD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Overall (N = 2578)</th>
<th>Patients receiving any biological agent after rituximab treatment (n = 185)</th>
<th>Patients receiving TNF inhibitor after rituximab treatment (n = 153)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Before other biological agent</td>
<td>After other biological agent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total exposure, patient-years</td>
<td>5013</td>
<td>186.05</td>
<td>182.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious infections, n</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious infections/100 patient-years</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>8.99</td>
<td>5.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95% CI</td>
<td>3.77 to 4.92</td>
<td>4.06 to 12.03</td>
<td>2.95 to 10.19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DMARD, disease-modifying antirheumatic drug; TNF, tumour necrosis factor.

**Serious infections**

The overall rate of SIE was 4.31 events/100 patient-years (95% CI 3.77 to 4.92) during the 5013 patient-years of observation for the 2578 patients across the rituximab RA clinical trial programme. Of the 185 patients who withdrew and received another biological DMARD, 15 SIE in 12 patients over 186.05 patient-years of follow-up were reported (6.99 events/100 patient-years; 95% CI 4.06 to 12.03) during treatment with rituximab and before the receipt of another biological DMARD (table 2). The specific SIE that occurred while on rituximab, but before subsequent exposure to another biological DMARD, included gastroenteritis, pneumonia, diverticulitis, diarrhoea, bronchitis, urinary tract infection (UTI), septic arthritis of the right hip, shigella and cellulitis (table 3). One of the cases of gastroenteritis occurred after the receipt of cyclophosphamide, but before the receipt of etanercept.

All patients receiving a biological DMARD

Following the initiation of the biological DMARD, 10 SIE in 10 patients over 182.51 patient-years were reported (5.49 events/100 patient-years; 95% CI 2.95 to 10.19). The median time to SIE after initiating another biological agent was 4 months (mean 7 months (SD 8), range 0–23 months). Ten patients experienced an SIE after the receipt of a subsequent biological DMARD, which included pneumonia, UTI, cellulitis, erysipelas, viral meningitis, wound infection and bacterial arthritis.

Among the 10 patients who had SIE after biological DMARD, the median peripheral B-cell count at the time of the infection was 17.5 (range 1–312, interquartile range (IQR) 2–59.0; table 3). Eight patients had peripheral B-cell counts less than LLN at the time of receiving the biological DMARD and at the last measurement before the SIE following another biological agent. The median B-cell levels of these eight patients were 4.5 cells/µl (range 1–59, IQR 2–40.5). One of the eight patients had an IgG level less than LLN (5.2 g/l) before the SIE; this patient experienced a UTI while on adalimumab and subsequently had an IgG level greater than LLN 18 days after the onset of infection. The IgM level for this patient was 0.35 g/l, which was less than LLN (0.5 g/l).

**Patients receiving TNF inhibitor**

The rate of SIE of the TNF inhibitor subgroup following rituximab treatment, but before the TNF inhibitor, was 6.63 events/100 patient-years (95% CI 5.57 to 12.32). The rate of SIE of the TNF inhibitor subgroup was 4.95 events/100 patient-years (95% CI 2.46 to 9.85) after receiving the TNF inhibitor (table 2).

**DISCUSSION**

The study population comprised a select group of patients with advanced RA, many of whom had previously been treated with...
multiple RA therapies, including biological agents before receiving rituximab, and then withdrew from clinical trials and subsequently received further biological therapy. In this analysis, the rate of SIE in patients who withdrew from rituximab and received a subsequent biological DMARD was 6.99 events per 100 patient-years (95% CI 4.06 to 12.03) before exposure to another biological DMARD and 5.49 events/100 patient-years (95% CI 4.06 to 12.03) before definitively concluding the risk of further RA biological DMARD were initiated, the rate and nature of SIE remain consistent with those observed during rituximab treatment and within expectations for patients treated with biological therapies. Further data are warranted before definitive conclusions can be drawn regarding the risk of SIIE in patients who receive another biological DMARD while B-cell depleted. Controlled studies to assess the safety of biological DMARD in combination with rituximab are ongoing.

### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SIE*</th>
<th>Time from last rituximab dose to subsequent biological DMARD (days)</th>
<th>Day of onset after biological DMARD†</th>
<th>Last CD19+ cell count before biological DMARD</th>
<th>Last CD19+ cell count before SIE‡ (days from CD19+ cell count to SIE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before other biological agent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diarrhoea</td>
<td>ABA 392</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7 (59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gastroenteritis</td>
<td>ADA 459</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1 (38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverticulitis</td>
<td>ADA 211</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>34 (85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pneumonia**</td>
<td>ADA 181</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0 (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pneumonia§</td>
<td>ANK 171</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverticulitis</td>
<td>ANK 515</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronchitis*↑↑</td>
<td>ETN 521</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>116 (44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infection of right hip</td>
<td>INF 262</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UTI*:↑↑</td>
<td>ETN 251</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>359 (51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gastroenteritis</td>
<td>Post-CYC, pre-ETN</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shigella infection</td>
<td>INF 358</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4 (52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cellulitis‖↑</td>
<td>INF 114</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0 (42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UTI‖↑</td>
<td>INF 366</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>6 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After other biological agent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erysipelas</td>
<td>ETN 148</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2 (39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cellulitis</td>
<td>ETN 43</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>59 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arthritis, bacterial**</td>
<td>ETN and INF 156</td>
<td>417 days after starting INF, 77 days after starting ETN</td>
<td>1 (INF), 53 (ETN)</td>
<td>53 (83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pneumonia</td>
<td>ABA 148</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>122 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pneumonia§</td>
<td>ANK 171</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 (28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meningitis (viral)</td>
<td>ADA 382</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7 (37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UTI**</td>
<td>ADA 181</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2 (73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UTI††</td>
<td>ETN 230</td>
<td>713</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>28 (62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cellulitis</td>
<td>ETN 166</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2 (82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wound infection</td>
<td>ETN 389</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>312 (45)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Patients with multiple serious adverse events are indicated. †In the case of serious infection before receipt of another biological disease-modifying antirheumatic drug (DMARD), this is not available (NA). In the case of a serious infection after another biological DMARD, this refers to the duration following receipt of the biological DMARD to serious infection events (SIE). ‡The lower limit of normal of peripheral CD19+ cell counts is <80 cells/μl. Note that CD19+ cell counts were often taken at various time intervals before the SIE (range 6–83 days; median 39 days). The same patient experienced SIE before and after the receipt of anakinra (ANK). *Patient experienced bronchitis followed by urinary tract infection (UTI) 4 months later. **Patient experienced pneumonia before receipt of adalimumab (ADA) and experienced UTI after receipt of ADA. ††Patient took blinded natalizumab before etanercept (ETN). ‖Four events were not categorised as serious adverse events per protocol, but required intravenous antibiotics. ABA, abatacept; CYC, cyclophosphamide; INF, infliximab; RA, rheumatoid arthritis; TNF, tumour necrosis factor.
Acknowledgements: The authors would like to thank the investigators, their staff and their patients for participation. The authors also wish to thank Genentech, Inc for their assistance in the preparation of this manuscript.

Funding: This report was sponsored by F Hoffmann-La Roche Ltd, Biogen Idec, Inc and Genentech, Inc. A portion of this work (Stanford University) was supported in part by a grant (S M01 RR000070) from the National Center for Research Resources, National Institutes of Health.

Competing interests: Declared. MCG has received speaker fees and research grant support from Roche and has served as a consultant for Roche, Biogen Idec and Genentech. FSB has received consulting and speaker fees from Roche. EX has received consulting and speaker fees from Roche and Genentech and research grants from Roche. PE has received consulting and speaker fees and research grants from Roche, he is the arc Professor of Rheumatology of the Academic Unit of Musculoskeletal Disease at Leeds University. SC has received consulting and speaker fees and research grants from Genentech, Inc. ELM has received consulting fees and research grants from Biogen Idec. YB, LB and TMS are employees and own shares in Genentech, Inc. A portion of this work (Stanford University) was supported in part by a grant (5 M01 RR000070) from the National Center for Research Resources, National Institutes of Health.

Role of the study sponsors: Data collection was co-sponsored by F Hoffmann-La Roche Ltd, Biogen Idec, Inc and Genentech, Inc. Statistical analyses were conducted by qualified statisticians who were employees of the sponsors. All the authors had access to and involvement in the interpretation of the data and input into the content of this manuscript (supervised by MCG).

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Ann Rheum Dis 2009 68: 1894-1897 originally published online January 20, 2009
doi: 10.1136/ard.2008.101675

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Ann Rheum Dis August 2011 Vol 70 No 8