Belimumab and the measurement of fatigue

I read with great interest the article by Strand et al. The aim of the study was to assess the effects of belimumab treatment plus standard systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) therapy on health-related quality of life in patients with active, autoantibody-positive SLE. Of particular interest are the results about the impact of belimumab on fatigued scores.

Fatigue is a common complaint of patients with SLE and is associated with diminished ability to function. In the majority of cases, the cause of fatigue is still unexplained and it is likely that many factors together lead to lupus fatigue. However, until recently, clinical trials have not routinely assessed fatigue.

The article by Strand et al showed that belimumab treatment can partially reduce fatigue, measured through the Functional Assessment of Chronic Illness Therapy-Fatigue Scale (FACIT-F scale). In more detail, FACIT-F scores were not significantly different across treatment groups at the week 24 prespecified secondary endpoint. However, scores from baseline to week 52 improved significantly (p<0.05) with belimumab 1 and 10 mg/kg versus placebo in A Study of Belimumab in Subjects with Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (BLISS)-S2, and with 1 mg/kg at weeks 52 and 76 secondary endpoints in BLISS-76. Differences observed between belimumab 10 mg/kg and placebo were not statistically significant in BLISS-76, but numerical improvements over placebo were observed by week 8 and sustained through week 76.

The BLISS trials adopted the FACIT-F as one of the outcome measures. This scale is a 13-item questionnaire that assesses self-reported fatigue and its effect upon daily activities and function. It was originally developed for the precise evaluation of fatigue associated with anaemia in patients with cancer. Subsequently, it has been employed in many diseases, including patients with rheumatoid arthritis and psoriatic arthritis.

FACIT-F is usually considered a unidimensional scale, with high internal reliability. However, in a recent study, published after the design of BLISS trials, the factorial structure of the FACIT-F has been questioned. More precisely, FACIT-F scores were not significantly different across treatment groups at the week 24 prespecified secondary endpoint. However, scores from baseline to week 52 improved significantly (p<0.05) with belimumab 1 and 10 mg/kg versus placebo in A Study of Belimumab in Subjects with Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (BLISS)-S2, and with 1 mg/kg at weeks 52 and 76 secondary endpoints in BLISS-76. Differences observed between belimumab 10 mg/kg and placebo were not statistically significant in BLISS-76, but numerical improvements over placebo were observed by week 8 and sustained through week 76.

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Davide Mazzoni

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