Effectiveness of TNF inhibitor treatment with various methotrexate doses in patients with rheumatoid arthritis: results from clinical practice

Tumour necrosis factor inhibitor (TNFi) treatment in patients with rheumatoid arthritis is more effective when combined with methotrexate (MTX). However, little is known about which MTX dose to use. With great interest, we read the article by Burmester et al. on the efficacy and safety of ascending MTX doses with adalimumab. This randomised double-blind study showed comparable results for adalimumab with 10 and 20 mg MTX, in MTX naive patients. Because of the potential side effects, it is often preferred to use MTX doses as low as possible. Therefore, the following questions arise: what happens in daily practice with MTX plus adalimumab, where most patients are not MTX naive when starting TNFi, and are the results the same for etanercept and infliximab?

Data were collected within the Dutch Rheumatoid Arthritis Monitoring (DREAM) registry between 2003 and 2012. Patients starting their first TNFi in combination with MTX were included in the study. Treatment effectiveness was analysed using disease activity score in 28 joints (DAS28) and health assessment questionnaire disability index (HAQ-DI) with linear mixed models for 1 year and long-term drug survival was analysed using Cox regression. Both were corrected for confounders.

Of the 1331 patients in the DREAM cohort starting TNFi plus MTX (551 adalimumab, 610 etanercept, 154 infliximab and 16 others), 430 started with adalimumab and had complete data. MTX should be started at 10 mg weekly, which can be increased to 20–25 mg. In daily practice, these four MTX doses are most frequently used starting TNFi and therefore analysed (n=371). The patient characteristics are presented in table 1.

There were no significant differences between the MTX dose groups in DAS28 scores over time, except that the 25 mg MTX group had a worse DAS28 over time than the 15 mg MTX group (see figure 1). The HAQ-DI over time presented the same results, both being corrected for confounders. There were no significant differences in drug survival: 25 mg MTX had worse long-term drug survival than 10, 15 and 20 mg MTX.

Focussing on the 10 and 20 mg MTX groups in combination with adalimumab (studied by Burmester et al), there are also no significant differences between these groups in daily practice. The same was found for etanercept and infliximab. However, patients who start with adalimumab while on 25 mg MTX, which is common in daily practice, have a significantly worse DAS28 over time and drug survival of the TNFi. This could be a more severe group of patients that can tolerate 25 mg MTX.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MTX Group</th>
<th>DAS28 (SD)</th>
<th>HAQ-DI (SD)</th>
<th>Dr. Oral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ada+10 mg (36)</td>
<td>54.1 (12.4)</td>
<td>1.35 (0.65)</td>
<td>0.802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ada+15 mg (104)</td>
<td>54.1 (11.9)</td>
<td>1.22 (0.58)</td>
<td>0.802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ada+20 mg (85)</td>
<td>54.1 (12.4)</td>
<td>1.13 (0.62)</td>
<td>0.802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ada+25 mg (146)</td>
<td>50.6 (13.1)</td>
<td>1.17 (0.61)</td>
<td>0.802</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 444 patients received the following MTX doses: 2.5 mg (1), 5 mg (6), 7.5 mg (10), 10 mg (36), 12.5 mg (11), 15 mg (104), 17.5 mg (2), 20 mg (85), 22.5 mg (0), 25 mg (146), 27.5 mg (0), 30 mg (19) and ≥35 mg (10).

*Number of DMARDs as comedication next to adalimumab. This includes methotrexate. Other possible DMARDs are sulfasalazine, hydroxychloroquine, leflunomide, azothioprine and infliximab.

DAS28, disease activity score in 28 joints; DMARDs, disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs; HAQ-DI, health assessment questionnaire disability index; RF+, rheumatoid factor positive.
but still have moderate to high disease activity. In conclusion, our data partly support the findings of Burmester et al and suggest that patients in the 10 and 15 mg group do not need a higher MTX dose at start with a TNFi treatment.

Sofie H M Manders,1 Wietske Kievit,2 Eddy Adang,2 Tim J Jansen,3 Jan N Stolk,4 Henk Visser,7 Annemarie M Schilder,6 Harald E Vonkeman,2 Mart A F J van de Laar,7 Piet L C M van Riel1

1Department of IQ Healthcare, Radboud University Medical Center, Nijmegen, The Netherlands
2Department of Health Evidence, Radboud University Medical Center, Nijmegen, The Netherlands
3Department of Rheumatic diseases, Radboud University Medical Center, Nijmegen, The Netherlands
4Department of Rheumatology, Ziekenhuis Gelderse Vallei, Ede, The Netherlands
5Department of Rheumatology, Rijnstate, Arnhem, The Netherlands
6Department of Rheumatology, Medical Centre Leeuwarden, Leeuwarden, The Netherlands
7Department of Rheumatology, Arthritis Centre Twente, University of Twente and Medisch Spectrum Twente, Enschede, The Netherlands

Correspondence to Sofie H M Manders, Department of IQ Healthcare, Radboud University Medical Center, Postbus 9101, Geert Grooteplein Noord 21 (route 114), Nijmegen 6500 HB, The Netherlands; sofiemands@radboudumc.nl

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Competing interests None.

REFERENCES
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