Why we need guidelines for clinical trials in vasculitis and systemic lupus erythematosus

Chetan Mukhtyar, Dimitrios Boumpas, Caroline Gordon, Wolfgang Gross, David Jayne, Raashid Luqmani

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The systemic vasculitides and systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) are uncommon systemic rheumatic diseases. They have attracted increasing clinical trial activity, for which there is a need for international consensus and guidelines on clinical research methodology. There have been a number of relatively small studies of these diseases. Unfortunately, these have had varying design, outcomes and assessment measures, thus it is difficult to interpret the evidence or subject it to a meta-analysis, and this has resulted in considerable uncertainty—for example, in deciding the role and dosing of cyclophosphamide in vasculitis or SLE.

Standardisation of the methodology for conducting clinical trials facilitates recruitment of patients into larger multicentre studies, which are likely to include non-expert centres, because of the low incidence and prevalence of cases. There is increasing involvement by the pharmaceutical industry in clinical trials of SLE and vasculitis. These companies will also need guidelines on which to base their trial protocols. Furthermore, standardisation allows for future inter-trial comparisons and meta-analysis of separately conducted studies. The purpose of this editorial is to highlight the existence of a new set of recommendations to improve the conduct of clinical trials in vasculitis and SLE.

The vasculitis and SLE working groups of the European League Against Rheumatism (EULAR) Standing Committee on International Clinical Studies Including Therapeutic Trials (ESCISIT) have developed guidelines based on current evidence. In the absence of evidence, expert consensus has formed the basis of some of the recommendations. In a review of 370 separate clinical studies of antineutrophil cytoplasmic antibody-associated systemic vasculitis (AASV) and polyarteritis nodosa, only 42 had sufficient consistency to allow comparison between trials.

These 42 papers were analysed and formed the basis for the current guidelines in vasculitis. Each guideline has been reviewed by the ESCICIT committee. The guidelines emphasise the need for collaboration and standardization of terminology and assessment in clinical trials. They also acknowledge the lack of diagnostic criteria in vasculitis and highlight the need for clear definitions of disease states (Table 1). The measurement and documentation of disease activity and disease-related damage should be standardised, using validated assessment tools to compare the efficacy of trial interventions or measure long-term morbidity in observational studies. This is especially important because of the absence of valid biomarkers to reflect disease activity in SLE and AASV.

Standardisation of concomitant therapy with steroids or other drugs such as angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors and trimethoprim/sulfamethoxazole is important and is highlighted in both sets of guidelines. Many studies of vasculitis include mixed cohorts with different diagnostic subgroups of vasculitis. Similarly, in SLE, patients may have variable organ involvement. In these circumstances, the recommendations suggest that common endpoints should be identified and that the trial is powered adequately to perform subgroup analyses. Both sets of guidelines stress the importance of long-term observation, as the likelihood of relapse in these diseases can only be appreciated over years rather than months. For example, a follow-up period of 5 years for a remission maintenance study in vasculitis has been recommended, where practical.

The lack of valid biomarkers in vasculitis and SLE mean that clinical assessment tools are relied upon for assessment of disease activity and damage. These clinical tools (eg Birmingham Vasculitis Activity Score (BVAS), BVAS for Wegener’s granulomatosis, Vasculitis Damage Index, Systemic Lupus Erythematosus Disease Activity Index, British Isles Lupus Assessment Group Index, Systemic Lupus International Collaborating Clinics/American College of Rheumatology Index), required trained personnel for appropriate use. With increasing recruitment of patients from non-expert centres, such training is desirable before trial recruitment is commenced. It may also be desirable that the recruitment of patients to clinical trials and their assessment should be performed by doctors rather than allied health professionals, as most nurses and physician assistants do not have sufficient experience to differentiate disease activity from other comorbidities such as infection and malignancy.

There is a need to consider pharmacoeconomic outcome measures in clinical trials, especially if biological agents are to be evaluated. The economic cost of the intervention should be balanced against the costs of treating ongoing chronic low-grade morbidity with current (less expensive) treatments that are likely to have lower efficacy and/or greater toxicity than the new intervention. We would encourage future studies to include a pharmacoeconomic aspect so that the use of potentially expensive agents can be justified by demonstrating cost-effective improvements in disease activity, quality of life and lower toxicity. However, we recognise there is little current experience of pharmacoeconomic evaluation in these diseases.

The development of recommendations for clinical trials might be seen as limiting or as forcing a change in practice. Individual groups might perceive the guidance as a way of undermining professional autonomy by making individual decisions.

Table 1 Definitions of clinical states of ANCA-associated vasculitides used in EUVAS trials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clinical subgroup</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Localised</td>
<td>Upper and/or lower respiratory tract disease without any other systemic involvement or constitutional symptoms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early systemic</td>
<td>Any, without organ-threatening or life-threatening disease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalised</td>
<td>Renal or other organ-threatening disease, serum creatinine &lt;500 μmol/l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe</td>
<td>Renal or other vital organ failure, serum creatinine &gt;500 μmol/l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refractory</td>
<td>Progressive disease unresponsive to glucocorticoids and cyclophosphamide</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ANCA, antineutrophil cytoplasmic antibody; EUVAS, European Vasculitis study group.
Table 2  Examples of application of standardisation in clinical trials of vasculitis and SLE (this is not an exhaustive list).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendations</th>
<th>Vasculitis</th>
<th>SLE</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classification: apply standard classification criteria</td>
<td>Chapelle Hill consensus definitions or ACR classification criteria for vasculitis.</td>
<td>ARA classification criteria for SLE.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staging/severity/eligibility: apply standardised structured clinical evaluation</td>
<td>BVAS, BVAS/WG, DEI, VDI.</td>
<td>BILAG Index, SLEDAI, SUCC/ACR Index.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome measures: clinical evaluation of disease activity and damage, quality of life and economic impact</td>
<td>BVAS, BVAS/WG, DEI, VDI, SF36, QALY assessment.</td>
<td>BILAG Index, SLEDAI, SUCC/ACR Index, SF36, QALY assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biomarkers*: serological assessment of disease</td>
<td>ANC.A, CRP, renal function</td>
<td>dDNA, complement, renal function</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relapse/remission/retrodictive disease definitions: based on standardised clinical evaluation and qualified by use of ongoing therapy</td>
<td>BVAS, BVAS/WG, DEI.</td>
<td>BILAG Index, SLEDAI, SUCC/ACR Index.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immunosuppressive therapy: standardise</td>
<td>Standard or biological therapy, placebo where indicated.</td>
<td>Standard or biological therapy, placebo where indicated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steroid therapy: standardise</td>
<td>Dose and method of administration</td>
<td>Dose and method of administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concomitant therapy: standardise</td>
<td>Trimethoprim/sulfamethoxazole</td>
<td>ACE inhibitors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ACE, angiotensin-converting enzyme; ANCA, antineutrophil cytoplasmic antibody; ARA, American Rheumatism Association; BILAG Index, British Isles Lupus Assessment Group Index; BVAS, Birmingham Vasculitis Activity Score; BVAS/WG, Birmingham Vasculitis Activity Score for Wegener’s Granulomatosis; CRP, C reactive protein; DEI, Disease Extent Index; dDNA, double-stranded DNA; IV, intravenous; QALY, quality-adjusted life-year; SF36, SF-36; SLE, systemic lupus erythematosus; SLEDAI, Systemic Lupus Erythematosus Disease Activity Index; SUCC, Systemic Lupus International Collaborating Clinics/American College Of Rheumatology; VDI, Vasculitis Damage Index.

*We recommend that these investigations are performed routinely as part of clinical protocol but cannot be used on their own to guide therapy unless the trial design is aimed at testing the validity of these markers.

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**Authors’ affiliations**

Chetan Mukhtyar, Raoshid Luqmani, Botnar Research Centre, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

Dimitrios Boumpas, Division of Rheumatology, Clinical Immunology and Allergy, University of Crete, Heraklion, Greece

Caroline Gordon, Department of Rheumatology, Birmingham University, Birmingham, UK

Wolfgang Gross, Department of Rheumatology, University Hospital of Schleswig-Holstein, Campus Lubeck, Lubeck, Germany

David Jayne, Department of Nephrology, Addenbrooke’s Hospital, Cambridge, UK

Correspondence to: Dr Raoshid Luqmani DM, FRCP, FRCP(E), Consultant Rheumatologist/Senior Lecturer, Rheumatology Department, Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre and University of Oxford, Windmill Road, Oxford OX3 7LD, UK; raoshid.luqmani@nrc.anglo.nhs.uk; raoshid.luqmani@nrc.anglo.nhs.uk

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