

LETTERS

Thalidomide inhibits the intractable cough of idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis

Idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis (IPF) is a progressive lung disorder of unknown aetiology that leads to death in the majority of patients within 3–5 years of diagnosis.¹ One of the most prominent features of IPF is a persistent dry cough that affects 73–86% of patients.¹ The aetiology of the cough is unknown but presumably linked to the lung fibrosis. Unfortunately, the cough is often disabling and resistant to traditional anti-tussive therapies.²

We present findings from a prospective cohort of 11 individuals with chronic cough caused by IPF who were enrolled in an open label phase II trial of thalidomide. Thalidomide was administered daily in 100–400 mg doses. Patients were followed with interval histories, physical examinations and quality of life questionnaires. Assessment and quantification of cough was recorded by subjects on question No 2 of the St George's Hospital Respiratory Questionnaire (SGRQ): "Over the last 3 months, I have coughed: most days a week; several days a week; a few days a month; only with chest infections; not at all" as well as by subject report. Change in cough was measured with the SGRQ from baseline to 3 months and compared using the Wilcoxon matched pairs signed ranks test.³

Of the 11 patients enrolled in the study, all noted cough "most or several days a week" at baseline. During the course of the study, 10 noted marked to complete resolution of cough while receiving thalidomide (table 1). The cough score was 4.9 (0.3) at

baseline and decreased to 2.2 (1.6) ($p = 0.03$) after 3 months of follow-up in six subjects for which there were complete data. Interestingly, three patients, who stopped taking thalidomide, all experienced return of the cough within 2 weeks. However, on reinstitution of thalidomide, all three patients again had resolution of the cough. In this study, the most common thalidomide associated adverse events were dizziness and constipation.

The aetiology of the cough associated with IPF is unclear. Although a significant number of patients with interstitial lung disease may have alternative reasons for their cough, nearly 50% have no other identifiable cause.⁴ Thalidomide, a drug with a tainted past due to causing teratogenic limb defects, has been "rediscovered" for its potent immunomodulatory, anti-inflammatory and antiangiogenic properties.⁵

We have described the resolution of IPF associated chronic cough with thalidomide in 10 patients with IPF. We believe this anti-tussive response to be a direct effect of the thalidomide, given the recurrence of the cough off the drug and suppression with resumption of thalidomide in three patients. The mechanism by which thalidomide suppressed the cough is unknown, but we hypothesise that it is due either to anti-inflammatory properties or a direct inhibitory effect on pulmonary sensory nerve fibres. As chronic cough has been associated with significant deterioration in patient's quality of life, amelioration of the IPF cough with thalidomide may be beneficial for these patients with an incurable progressive disease.

In summary, our observations suggest that future clinical trials using low dose thalidomide for the suppression of cough in IPF are warranted.

M R Horton, S K Danoff, N Lechtzin

Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Department of Medicine, Division of Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine, Baltimore, Maryland, USA

Correspondence to: Dr M R Horton, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, 1830 East Monument Street, Suite 500, Baltimore, MD 21212, USA; mhorton2@jhmi.edu

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Counting, analysing and reporting exacerbations of COPD in randomised controlled trials

I read with interest the article by Aaron *et al.*¹ In this paper, data from the Optimal Trial² were reanalysed for the purpose of examining the effect of differences in counting and analysing exacerbation rates on estimated treatment effects in chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). The authors compare exacerbation rates in two of the three treatment arms in the trial (ie, those randomly allocated to tiotropium + placebo or to tiotropium + fluticasone-salmeterol). They compare an "intention to treat" strategy with a strategy using "time in study only" and state that the often used method of excluding patients after they stop study medication exaggerates the estimated benefits of treatment.

Data from large controlled trial are often reanalysed and they usually provide a good and solid database for assessment of methodology. However, when trials are reused, the original study is often only described briefly in secondary publications and often crucial information is missing. This seems to be the case for the reanalysis of the Optimal Study. In the original report,² the numbers of patients withdrawing from the tiotropium + placebo group and the tiotropium + fluticasone-salmeterol group within the 52 week treatment period were 74 (47%) and 37 (26%), respectively, indicating less treatment efficacy in the former group. In the original paper—but not in the reanalysis—it is also shown that of the patients who discontinued use of study medications, 74% in the tiotropium + placebo group and 54% in the tiotropium + fluticasone-salmeterol group received an open label inhaled steroid and long acting beta₂ agonist combination inhaler for the remainder of the study. That approximately half of the patients randomised to tiotropium + fluticasone-salmeterol were given the same type of treatment does not substantially affect the analyses. However, when those stopping tiotropium + placebo are given an open label inhaled steroid and long acting beta₂ agonist combination inhaler for the remainder of the study it is not surprising that the "intention to treat strategy" dilutes the effect of the triple combination treatment. Although we all want conservative treatment estimates from controlled trials, there is a real risk of getting not just conservative but in fact insignificant findings if the actual study

Table 1 Resolution of cough with thalidomide

Subject No	Cough baseline*	Cough outcome
1	Most days a week	Not at all*
2	Most days a week	Resolved†
3	Most days a week	A few days a month*
5	Most days a week	Resolved†
6	Several days a week	Resolved†
8	Most days a week	Not at all*
9	Most days a week	Not at all*
10	Most days a week	Resolved†
11	Most days a week	Not at all*
12	Most days a week	No data
13	Most days a week	A few days a month*

11 patients with idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis described significant cough at baseline, as determined by question No 2 on the St George's Hospital Respiratory Questionnaire (SGRQ) and 10 experienced marked suppression of cough with thalidomide.

Patient No 12: response unknown as he was lost to follow-up.

*Cough as recorded by subjects on question No 2 of the SGRQ: "Over the last 3 months, I have coughed: most days a week; several days a week; a few days a month; only with chest infections; not at all."

†Subjects who did not complete the 3 month follow-up were asked about cough at the exit interview.