

RESPONSES TO A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF ANTICHOLINERGICS VERSUS PLACEBO

Hypothesis / aims of study

The systematic review comparing the use of anticholinergic drugs for OAB with placebo was not received well in some circles(1). The review concluded that drugs produced small, statistically significant, improvements over placebo, but it was not clear whether they were any use in real life situations. This was because there was no information about whether the small differences were of benefit to patients, and also no information about whether the treatment effects and usage persisted with time. The conclusion of the review disagreed with the ICI committee, which had concluded that anticholinergic drugs were clinically useful.

One recent paper stated that the review had been criticised, but neglected to say what the criticisms were and whether they were reasonable, while an article sent for refereeing stated that the conclusions of the systematic review were "highly subjective" again without justification. Because of these negative, but non-specific comments, on the review it was decided to investigate as many as possible of the written responses to the review.

Study design, materials and methods

The ISI Web of Science and Google Scholar were searched for citations of the systematic review, and the abbreviated paper that was published in a journal(2) on the 22nd February 2005. The journal web site was consulted for responses to the paper. The ISI Web of Science does not reference the Cochrane Library so only had citations of the paper. The articles citing the review or the paper were retrieved in full. Two investigators independently read the articles, and recorded the context and tenor of the comments. The investigators then together grouped the comments.

Results

Thirty-one of thirty-three articles were retrieved. Eleven cited the review, 17 the paper and 3 referred to both. Of the 20 references to the paper 11 were picked up only by the ISI Web of Science, 6 only by Google scholar and 3 by both. Nineteen of the references were from review articles, 7 from research papers and 5 from other types of publication. There were 5 letters in response to the paper and the authors recorded four instances of comments on the review at conferences. Only one article was accompanied by a statement saying that there was no conflict of interest for the authors. Four articles stated they (or the study) were drug company funded, three others stated conflicts of interest of the authors and the rest had no conflict of interest statement. Two of the studies are awaiting translation before being added to the further analysis.

Six main types of response were noted:

- The review was cited to support a statement about the effect of anticholinergic drugs. A notable feature of these was that the words efficacy and effectiveness appeared to be used as synonyms.
- The review was cited to support some other statement about anticholinergic drugs.
- The review was cited to support the design of further research.
- The review was cited to criticise some aspect of it.
- The review was cited in passing to notify that it had been seen.
- The review was cited with brief mention of some of the findings.

Other citations expressed dissatisfaction with the headline in the journal, and one dismissed the review because it did not separate out the different anticholinergic drugs. Only one article and two of the letters offered constructive criticism.

A common theme across many of the citations was selective reporting, sometimes giving an incorrect impression of the conclusions of the review. Selective reporting is normal practice

when citing articles and it is unclear whether it, and giving a misleading impression, happened more here than is usual.

Interpretation of results

The general impression of the authors that this review was not well received is not really confirmed by searching the articles that cited it. Most citations did not make it clear whether they approved of the review or not. The next most common was to imply the review was wrong but give no reason. Only a very few tried to argue whether the conclusions were scientifically justified. Several of the citations confused efficacy and effectiveness, using them as if they were synonyms. The review states that there is clear evidence of efficacy, but almost none about effectiveness.

Expressing publicly disagreement with the review was more common at conferences. It would appear that the more public the arena the less severe the criticism. No one has made use of the comments and criticisms feature of the Cochrane Library, which requires the authors to answer.

Concluding message

While this review was not universally accepted only one article and some of the letters to the journal attempted a constructive criticism. Many of the references were in passing and some had incorrect interpretations. Certainly none of the criticisms were enough to make the review authors rethink their position.

1. Anticholinergic drugs versus placebo for overactive bladder syndrome in adults. Cochrane Library. Issue 3. Oxford: Update Software, 2002
2. Effectiveness of anticholinergic drugs compared with placebo in the treatment of overactive bladder: systematic review. *BMJ* 2003;726:841–4.