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**Treatment of Undifferentiated Connective Tissue Disease by Primary Care Providers using csDMARDs**

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**Abstract**

- Undifferentiated connective tissue disease (UCTD) is an autoimmune disease that presents similarly to other rheumatic conditions but fails to meet laboratory requirements which indicate a specific disease such as rheumatoid arthritis, systemic lupus erythematosus, Sjogren’s or scleroderma.
- UCTD presentation can include arthralgias, myalgias, fatigue, fever, Raynaud’s phenomenon and sicca-like symptoms with a positive antinuclear antibody (ANA) test.
- Patients with UCTD symptoms are normally referred to rheumatology but a shortage exists leaving primary care providers to treat UCTD patients.
- Using disease modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs) such as hydroxychloroquine is an option but it is not commonly prescribed by PCPs.
- The study’s purpose is to determine if PCPs can effectively initiate and appropriately manage UCTD patients using DMARDs, such as hydroxychloroquine, to reduce patient’s symptoms and functional impairment.
- In the absence of rheumatology, PCPs using DMARDs such as hydroxychloroquine can safely and effectively provide treatment for these patients.

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**Introduction**

- UCTD is also known as incomplete lupus erythematosus, undifferentiated systemic rheumatic disease, latent lupus, and potential lupus.
- Rheumatology shortage of 50% by 2025: UCTD patients will face a shortage of 50% by 2025 leaving primary care providers to treat UCTD patients.
- DMARDs, such as hydroxychloroquine: proven effective in treating patients with UCTD, SLE, and RA.
- Primary care providers (PCP) play a key part in early recognition and referral of patients with UCTD symptoms.
- Scholarly project focus is review of available literature which demonstrates the use of csDMARDs by PCPs in treating UCTD patients.
- Projected outcome is that pain and functional impairment can be decreased via treatment with disease modifying antirheumatic drugs in the absence of rheumatology intervention.

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**Statement of the Problem**

- Use of csDMARDs by rheumatologists has the potential to control rheumatic diseases.
- UCTD patients often lack access to timely treatment by rheumatologist.
- Delaying treatment may result in ongoing symptoms such as arthralgias, myalgias, and functional impairment.
- UCTD patients who do not have access to rheumatologists frequently look to their primary care providers for treatment.
- Question: Is it possible to effectively decrease the inherent symptoms of UCTD by offering early interventions using csDMARDs such as hydroxychloroquine through a primary care provider?

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**Discussion**

- Puchner et al. (2016) and Badley et al. (2015) identified the role of primary care providers to be significant in treating early connective tissue disease due to the rheumatology shortages.
- Small percentage of the primary care physicians acknowledged having initiated DMARD therapy, but the majority of general practitioners pointed out that they would prescribe DMARDs. (Puchner et al., 2016)
- Possible delays in referrals to rheumatology resulted in long-term harm, including joint inflammation and destruction.
- Primary care providers comfort level and knowledge of DMARD therapy use can be limiting factors.
- Current studies have provided significant data supporting the use of DMARDs in treating UCTD, but there is minimal evidence that supports the use of DMARDs by primary care providers.

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**Applicability to Clinical Practice**

- Primary care providers have an opportunity to greatly impact the progression and detrimental effects of UCTD using early csDMARDs therapy.
- Given the gap and lack of accessibility to rheumatologists by patients, UCTD, health care sector could collaborate with primary care providers to offer formal training.
- Rheumatology societies and organizations should consider the possibility of working with physician assistant programs and schools of nursing to integrate rheumatology into the curriculum. (Solomon et al., 2014)
- Greater comfort in prescribing DMARDS could be achieved by altering the design of educational programs for primary care providers. (Gerrits et al., 2013)
- There continues to be a need for improving awareness and education regarding diagnosing and treating UCTD patients in primary care where early treatments with DMARDs make a significant impact on a patient’s health and quality of life.

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**Literature Review**

**Clinical and Serological Presentation of UCTD**

- UCTD clinical course includes Raynaud’s phenomenon, sicca symptoms, arthralgias, arthritis, and mucocutaneous manifestations: photosensitivity, malar rash, and oral aphthous ulcers as well as a positive ANA for at least 3 years (Mosca, 2004).

**Prevalence of UCTD**

- UCTD patients are predominantly middle-aged females with disease onset between 32-44 years of age. (Conti et al., 2010)
- 20% of newly referred patients to rheumatology may fall within the undifferentiated profile excluding rheumatoidarthritis. (Mosca et al., 2011)
- Between 50-70% patients remain undifferentiated. (Conti et al., 2010 & Mosca et al., 2011)

**Prescriptive Treatment Methods for UCTD**

- Use of hydroxychloroquine, NSAIDs, and low dose corticosteroids was sufficient to maintain UCTD in an inactive status including a reduction of arthralgias, functional limitations, myalgias and fever. (Conti et al., 2010).
- It is recommended that early UCTD patients have strict follow up at least every six months. (Conti et al., 2010).
- One-third of rheumatologists and general practitioners agreed that when rheumatology availability is limited, then csDMARDs could also be initiated by a general practitioner. (Puchner et al., 2016).

**Role of Primary Care in the Management of UCTD**

- On average, 10.8% of the patients made at least one visit to primary care for inflammatory arthritis. (Badley et al., 2015)
- Primary care providers were less likely to use csDMARDs to treat connective tissue disease symptoms. (Badley et al., 2015)
- DMARD treatment in primary care was imperative because unnecessary referrals of patients diagnosed with rheumatic condition increased the work overload in rheumatology practices. (Puchner et al., 2016)
- Although csDMARD therapy is not commonly initiated by primary care physicians, DMARDs are recommended, especially when timely access to rheumatologists is limited. (James et al., 2007).

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**Clinical Features of UCTD**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptom</th>
<th>% Patients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fatigue</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raynaud’s syndrome</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arthralgia</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muscle pains</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fever</td>
<td>51</td>
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<tr>
<td>Polyarthralgia</td>
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<td>Xerophthalmia</td>
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<td>Serositis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weight loss</td>
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<td>Hypothyroidism</td>
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<td>Oral aphthous</td>
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<td>Serositis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Photosensitivity</td>
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<td>Erythema nodosum</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**References**


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