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Letrozole vs. Clomiphene Citrate for Infertility in Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome

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Introduction

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) is the leading cause of anovulatory infertility and the most common endocrinopathy in women of reproductive age (Rosenfield & Ehrmann, 2016).

Currently, the first-line treatment for infertility associated with PCOS is clomiphene citrate, which was introduced in the 1960s (Morad & Farag, 2015). However, it has been proposed that an aromatase inhibitor, specifically letrozole, should become the first-line treatment for these patients due to a decreased adverse effect profile, a lower incidence of simultaneous multiple gestation pregnancies, and a decreased risk of congenital abnormalities.

Abstract

PURPOSE: To determine if letrozole is an equal or better alternative to clomiphene citrate for infertility treatment in PCOS patients

LITERATURE REVIEW: Letrozole was found to have higher ovulation rates, fewer twin pregnancies/more single births, higher pregnancy rates, and higher live birth rates compared to clomiphene citrate. There were no significant differences between letrozole and clomiphene citrate concerning congenital abnormalities and miscarriage rates. The results regarding ectopic pregnancies were comparable between both groups.

CONCLUSION: The results provide information supporting letrozole as an adequate first-line alternative to clomiphene citrate for infertility in patients with PCOS.

Statement of the Problem

25% of patients with infertility are clomiphene citrate resistant and unable to ovulate, and many are unable to conceive with clomiphene citrate and subsequently experience clomiphene citrate failure (Legro et al., 2014).

Clomiphene citrate has also been associated with a limited efficacy including a 22% live birth rate and increased risk of multiple pregnancies (Legro et al., 2014). If an alternative to clomiphene citrate is available that is safer and more effective, it should be implemented as the first-line treatment in daily medical practice.

Research Question

In the patient with polycystic ovarian syndrome, is letrozole compared to clomiphene citrate more effective for ovulation induction, endometrial thickness, single follicle stimulation/single gestation birth, pregnancy rate, and live birth rate?

In the patient with polycystic ovarian syndrome, is letrozole compared to clomiphene citrate safer for the mother and baby regarding ovulation hypertension syndrome, congenital anomalies, ectopic pregnancies, and miscarriage rates?

Literature Review

Efficacy

Ghahiri et al.: RCT, n=101. No significant difference regarding ovulation and pregnancy rates

Sharief & Nafee: RCT, n=75. Letrozole: Lower number of mature follicles (p=0.001). Letrozole: Higher endometrial thickness (p=0.0001). Letrozole: Higher rate of ovulation and pregnancies (p<0.001). No significant difference in pregnancy rates

Amer et al.: RCT, n=159. Letrozole: Higher rate of ovulation (p=0.0270). Letrozole: Greater endometrial thickness (p=0.031). No significant difference regarding pregnancy rate

Legro et al.: RCT, n=750. Letrozole: Higher cumulative live birth rate (p=0.007). Letrozole: Higher ovulation rate (p=0.001). Letrozole: Greater single pregnancy rate (p=0.03)

Liu et al.: n=63. No congenital abnormalities in either group

Ghahiri et al.: n=101. Five miscarriages in both groups. No cases of ovarian hypertension syndrome (OHSS)

Safety

Sharma et al.: n=201. No significant difference in rate of congenital or chromosomal abnormalities compared to natural conception

Legro et al.: n=750. No significant difference in rate of congenital defects, pregnancy loss, or miscarriage rate. Lower neonatal death rate and fetal death rate (p=0.05)

Liu et al.: n=63. No congenital abnormalities in either group

Ghahiri et al.: n=101. Five miscarriages in both groups. No cases of ovarian hypertension syndrome (OHSS)

Discussion

Ovarulation rate: Ghahiri et al. (2016) and Amer et al. (2017) found no significant difference, while Sharief & Nafee (2015), Hussain et al. (2013), Legro et al. (2014) and Liu et al. (2017) all found letrozole to have statistically significant higher ovulation rates.

Endometrial thickness: Sharief & Nafee (2015) and Hussain et al. (2013) found that letrozole had significantly higher endometrial thickness, while Al-Shakil et al. (2017) found that clomiphene citrate had higher endometrial thickness.

Single follicle stimulation/single gestation birth: Sharief & Nafee (2015) found that letrozole had a higher rate of single follicles, while Al-Shakil et al. (2017) reported letrozole to have a higher number of single follicles.

Letrozole & Nafee (2015) reported one twin pregnancy in the clomiphene citrate group while in the letrozole group, and Legro (2014) reported a higher single pregnancy rate with letrozole.

Pregnancy rates: Legro et al. (2014) and Amer et al. (2017) found letrozole to have higher pregnancy rates with letrozole, other studies found no significant difference.

Live birth rates: Legro et al. (2014) found letrozole to have a significantly higher live birth rate, while Liu (2017) found no significant difference.

Letrozole Hypertension Syndrome (OHSS): Ghahiri et al. (2016) and Hussain et al. (2013) reported no cases of OHSS, while other studies did not disclose this information.

Congenital abnormalities: No significant difference between the two drugs (Sharma et al., 2014, Legro et al. (2014, Amer et al. (2017) and Liu et al. (2014))

Ectopic pregnancies: rates between the studies ranged from 2%-10.3% in the letrozole group and 0.8%-12.5% in the clomiphene group

Misscarriage rates: No significant findings other than Tatsuma et al. (2017) reporting a much lower miscarriage rate with letrozole compared to normal pregnancy

Applicability to Clinical Practice

It is apparent that letrozole could be at the very least an equal alternative, with more research pointing towards an improvement in efficacy with letrozole compared to clomiphene citrate.

Infertility due to PCOS is a very common complaint and a struggle that is frequently brought to the provider’s attention. Many women have tried to become pregnant with other fertility treatments to no avail or are beginning their infertility treatment journey. It is promising to find a treatment which will lead to letrozole becoming a first-line pharmacological treatment for infertility in PCOS patients. Providers will be able to inform their patients of all treatment options available including letrozole and the positive impact it can have on infertility.

With a lower rate of multiple gestation pregnancies and a higher rate of ovulation, pregnancy, and live birth rates, women with infertility will be able to have more hope in their dreams of becoming a mother with the most effective medication available to them. This could change the provider’s way of practice if the provider is able to offer the patient an alternative medication that is superior to the traditional option, and ultimately providing the best outcome possible for each patient.

References


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