Editorial

Updating the 2003 European regulatory requirements for registering disease-modifying drugs to be used in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis

EMA guidelines: out of date

Pivotal clinical trials of several drugs licensed in Europe have used the ‘Points to consider on clinical investigation of medicinal products other than NSAIDs for the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis’, published in 2003 by the European Medicines Agency’s (EMA) Committee for Proprietary Medicinal Products for Human Use (CPMP) [1].

This document was produced to specify requirements for investigation and approval of new DMARDs; however, since it was published we have seen the development of novel therapies for RA (especially biologic agents) and new therapeutic strategies emphasizing early intervention and tight control to achieve low disease activity or remission [2]. In light of this, the ethics and study design of clinical trials need to be reassessed.

To address this situation, the authors—a consensus committee bringing together expertise in RA, clinical trial design and regulatory affairs—reviewed the current literature. A consensus was reached, endorsed by all authors, that updates the CHMP guidance, specifically as it relates to, the choice of comparator in different patient populations, the assessment of signs and symptoms and physical function and structural damage evaluation and duration of trials.

Patient populations

The patient population studied will have an important influence on the choice of comparator, but also on the assessment of joint damage. Three distinct RA populations can be defined readily by prior treatment, implying three potential indications for use of a new agent: (i) DMARD-naïve, including MTX-naïve, patients (first-line indication); (ii) MTX-refractory or MTX-intolerant patients (second-line indication); and (iii) biologics-refractory or biologics-intolerant patients who have failed one or more biologics (third-line indication). While the target of RA therapy today generally constitutes remission or low disease activity [2], different aims need to be considered for each of these patient populations. It is important to optimize comparability between studies and to homogenize patient populations by clearly pre-specifying, justifying and documenting failure of or intolerance to previous treatment in the protocol.

Choice of comparator

Early, DMARD-naïve RA (first-line indication)

In early RA or DMARD/MTX-naïve patients, using state-of-the-art therapy to prevent structural damage and irreversible disability is pivotal. It follows that it is unacceptable to study these patients with pure placebo, since joint destruction starts within the first 2 years in 70% of patients [3]. Indeed, most contemporary randomized controlled trials (RCTs) in early RA have employed an active comparator, usually a synthetic DMARD (MTX) [4]. In DMARD- or MTX-naïve RA patients, even those with severe active disease, MTX is still considered the gold standard [5]. Clearly, this is the preferred trial design for this patient population.

A new agent may receive a first-line therapy indication either as monotherapy or in combination with MTX or other DMARDs. First-line monotherapy (or combination therapy) approval might be achieved following a direct comparison of the new agent to MTX, or alternatively to SSZ or LEF, at contemporary doses. The new agent would need to demonstrate statistically significant efficacy that is at least equal to that of MTX/DMARD in terms of signs and symptoms, structural damage and physical function, along with a similar or better safety profile [6].

Established RA

In contrast to early RA, in established RA, new agents have often been evaluated against a placebo comparator, as an add-on to a synthetic DMARD, usually MTX. MTX-refractory RA patients should have demonstrated a documented and auditable inadequate clinical response to previous MTX therapy of at least 4 months duration, with a dose of ~25mg for at least 2 months, unless intolerant [7].

Current CHMP guidance states that continuing placebo treatment indefinitely is unethical; it defines 3-6 months as an acceptable period of use and recommends predefined rules for withdrawal [1]. When continuing prior DMARD therapy, escape rules of 14-16 weeks with primary endpoint analyses at time points before or after the escape have been used by several regulatory trials of licensed targeted biologicals [8]. However, the most recent
The question of endpoints is of particular importance. ACR20/50/70 responder rates have withstood the trends in time, but European League Against Rheumatism (EULAR) and ACR have recently defined the items that should be reported in clinical trials, including publications on clinical trials, in order to ensure better indirect comparability [15, 16]. To this end, the composite scores recommended, aside from ACR response, are DAS-28 joint count, simplified disease activity index (SDAI) and clinical disease activity index (CDAI). In addition, ACR and EULAR have defined new remission criteria [17]. Since remission and low disease activity are current therapeutic goals, these states (rather than responses alone) should constitute clinical trial endpoints [15, 16].

The 2010 ACR/EULAR criteria for RA [18, 19] allow for earlier classification of the disease than the 1987 criteria for the original active treatment group, maintenance of efficacy in the long term. Further suggestions with maintenance of prognostic balance have also been made [9]. Alternatively, the comparator group could be re-randomized at 3 months to either another standard active treatment (e.g. a licensed biologic or synthetic DMARD) or the new agent.

An active comparator [10], rather than placebo, is more in line with the present standard of care in this RA population. There is still a lack of good RCTs on head-to-head comparisons of biologic agents and it could be suggested that for approval of a biologic agent, comparative trials vs other biologicals should be a requirement. A Phase III study of the new agent plus or minus a synthetic DMARD vs a TNF inhibitor plus synthetic DMARD is highly advised. The TNF inhibitors with MTX are considered the best comparators as they show the tightest confidence intervals for efficacy, have the longest safety record of the targeted biologics and comprise multiple established licensed agents with similar efficacy and safety findings.

However, designing such comparative studies may prove challenging. Observed differences between a new agent and a TNF inhibitor are likely to be small, which may make results difficult to interpret. Furthermore, the potential need for a very large sample size to demonstrate non-inferiority is a recognized obstacle to study conduct.

Biologics-refractory patients

Biologics-refractory RA patients should have demonstrated a documented and auditable inadequate clinical response to previous TNF inhibitor/synthetic DMARD combination therapy of at least 3 months duration before entering a new study. Studies could be designed against a background DMARD such as MTX plus placebo (for 3 months) or the prior biologic therapy, unchanged upon enrolment into the study. The new agent would need to demonstrate superior efficacy to the comparator in signs and symptoms, ideally also structural damage and/or physical function, at 3 months without inferiority in the other assessed variables. After 3 months, to demonstrate maintenance of benefit with the new agent, comparators could be other licensed biologics or synthetic DMARDs that the patients had not previously received.

For a structural damage indication, studies shorter than those specified by the CHMP’s 2003 document appear appropriate [11]. To obtain a structural damage claim, randomized, double-blind studies could be conducted against an appropriate comparator for 3 months. To minimize patient exposure to inadequate therapy (placebo with background DMARD), the requirement to confirm short-term structural damage changes with longer term follow-up could also be addressed by instituting another licensed agent at the 3-month limit in all patients in the comparator group (or by re-randomizing). In the comparator group, imputation of the 3-month changes towards >6 months could be and has been done successfully [12]. In this scenario, all patients would receive X-rays at the 3-month time point of escape and at different time points up to 12 months (or more) for comparative purposes.

While many patients, even with active disease, do not progress within 1 year [13], any early difference (i.e. more rapid progression in the placebo/control group) is likely to be retained at later time points since rescue is limited to the most severe patients. With this design, all patients receive active treatment after 3 months, hence may show a subsequent slowing of the rate of progression. For the original active treatment group, maintenance of the effect seen at 3 months can be documented by within-group comparisons with the results seen at 6 and 12 months. Failure to show a structural benefit at 3 months, as possibly seen with agents with slower onset of effect, should not preclude a structural damage indication if such efficacy is clearly shown at subsequent time points. Importantly, an open-label trial should still be able to lead to a structural claim as long as the radiographs are read blindly.

Regarding assessment of physical function it needs to be borne in mind that long-standing disease refractory to several agents will have a lower responsiveness of disability scores [14] due to accrued joint damage and established, irreversible disability. Thus, under these circumstances, primary endpoints require careful selection. Otherwise, improvement in physical function can already easily be definitely seen from 3 months onward and frequently earlier. Table 1 summarizes the suggestions of the Consensus Group.
Since all clinical trials of the past two decades have employed the 1987 criteria, classification according to both criteria sets should be reported and sub-analyses of results according to both presented to ensure comparability with previous trials. Further, it is to be expected that non-radiological imaging modalities, such as MRI or sonography, will soon be sufficiently validated in relation to reproducibility, sensitivity to change and effects on long-term clinical and functional outcomes to allow for their use as outcomes in clinical trials. Moreover, in the not too distant future it may become possible to predict the occurrence of RA and the question will arise whether pre-emptive therapy (prevention of occurrence of RA) should be considered. However, these issues need not be addressed today but rather in a subsequent update of the document.

In summary, the recent availability of several powerful drugs and the present recommendations on RA management mean that RA patients' exposure to placebo must be abandoned or at least limited to a very short period, and encourage direct comparisons with active drugs, including face-to-face comparisons between biologics. Strategies to support efficacy claims, including structure, can be proposed to shorten placebo exposure to a maximum of 3 months or to enable the use of an active comparator, in accordance with modern ethical requirements.

### Acknowledgements

Other members of the Task Force were: Willard H. Derew, Frits J. Lekkerkerker, Bruce H. Mitlak, Sif Ormardottir, Laurence Paolozzi, Ravi Rao and Yannis Tsouderos.

**Disclosure statement:** Group for the Respect of Ethics and Excellence in Science (GREES) is listed as an interested party at EMA; but all authors participated in the meeting without official mandate from the EMA. Nevertheless, the outcomes of this consensus activity will be presented to the CHMP by GREES representatives. Participants were invited by GREES on the basis of their expertise in RA, clinical trial design and/or regulatory affairs. The final document was obtained after thorough discussion of the available data, consensus finding by verbal agreement and contribution to and/or approval of the final result. J.S.S. has received grant support from and/or provided expert advice for Abbott, Amgen, Bristol-Myer-Squibb (BMS), Centocor, MSD, Novo-Nordisk, Pfizer, Roche and UCB. M.B. has performed consultancy services for: Sanofi, Roche, Medimmune, Bristol Myers Squibb, Augurex, Novartis, UCB, Glaxo-Smith-Kline (GSK), Horizon Pharma, Mundipharma, Merck Serono, AstraZeneca, Boehringer Ingelheim, Abbott, Medimmune, BMS, Combinatorx, Genentech and Phase 3 Development Société Anonyme à Responsabilité Limitée (SARL) and has also been a speaker for Schering-Plough. F.C.B. is a member of Speakers' Bureau for Abbott, Pfizer and Wyeth. P.E. has provided expert advice and undertaken clinical trials for Pfizer, Merck-Sharp-Dohme (MSD), Abbot.

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific claim</th>
<th>Current CHMP guidance</th>
<th>New suggestion</th>
<th>Time points, months</th>
<th>Instruments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disease activity (signs and symptoms)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3-6&lt;TAB&gt;</td>
<td>Controlled</td>
<td>ACR response, DAS/28, Sharp score including modifications, Larsen scores, HAQ, AIMS (function and quality of life), SF-36 (PCS, PF)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint damage</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Controlled</td>
<td>DAS-28 including EUAR, Sharp score including modifications, Larsen scores, HAQ, AIMS (function and quality of life), SF-36 (PCS, PF)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical function</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Controlled or Open laba</td>
<td>DAS-28 including EUAR, Sharp score including modifications, Larsen scores, HAQ, AIMS (function and quality of life), SF-36 (PCS, PF)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<TAB>Subsequent to the controlled phase. <a>Subsequent to the open-label assessment period (such as ACR50 and ACR70 or remission) peak later than the 3-month time point. For safety assessment, an additional open-label assessment period in combination with the controlled period of study would be required to provide for a total of at least 12 months of evaluation. Includes assessment at the 3-month time point, i.e. 6 months from baseline. NA: not applicable; PCS: physical component summary; PF: physical function domain; SF-36: short-form 36-item health survey.

[20]. Since all clinical trials of the past two decades have employed the 1987 criteria, classification according to both criteria sets should be reported and sub-analyses of results according to both presented to ensure comparability with previous trials. Further, it is to be expected that non-radiological imaging modalities, such as MRI or sonography, will soon be sufficiently validated in relation to reproducibility, sensitivity to change and effects on long-term clinical and functional outcomes to allow for their use as outcomes in clinical trials. Moreover, in the not too distant future it may become possible to predict the occurrence of RA and the question will arise whether pre-emptive therapy (prevention of occurrence of RA) should be considered. However, these issues need not be addressed today but rather in a subsequent update of the document.

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Roche and BMS. T.B. has received financial/material support from Pfizer, Novartis, Roche and BMS. N.G. was an employee at UCB until September 2010. She is currently employed at Array BioPharma Inc. She owns stock and/or stock options in both companies. D.J.E. is the Senior Director, Clinical Development, Inflammation and Autoimmunity at Medimmune (Gaithersburg, MD, USA). P.D. has received consultant or speaker fees from Abbott, BMS, Wyeth, Schering, Roche and UCB. J.-Y.R. has received consulting fees or paid advisory boards from Servier, Novartis, Negma, Lilly, Wyeth, Amgen, GlaxoSmithKline, Roche, Merck, Nycomed, NPS Pharmaceuticals Inc., Thermex and UCB. He has received lecture fees when speaking at the invitation of a commercial sponsor from Merck Sharp & Dohme, Lilly, Rottapharm, Institut Biochimique Société Anonyme (IBSA), Genevriér, Novartis, Servier, Roche, GlaxoSmithKline, Teijin, Teva, Ebeewoe Pharma, Zodiac, Analis, Thermex, Nycomed and Novo-Nordisk and has received grant support from Industry from Bristol Myers Squibb, Merck Sharp & Dohme, Rottapharm, Teva, Lilly, Novartis, Roche, GlaxoSmithKline, Amgen and Servier. All other authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Josef S. Smolen1,2, Maarten Boers3, Eric C. Abadie4, Ferdinand C. Breedveld5, Paul Emery6,7, Thomas Bardin8, Niti Goel9, Dominique J. Ethgen10, Bernard P. Avouac11, Patrick Durez12, Bruno Flamion13, Andrea Laslop14, Pierre Miossec15, Susanne Reiter16 and Jean-Yves Reginster17 on behalf of the Task Force of the Group for the Respect of Ethics and Excellence in Science (GREEES)

1 Department of Medicine 3, Division of Rheumatology, Medical University of Vienna, 2nd Department of Medicine, Hietzing Hospital, Vienna, Austria, 2Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, VU University Medical Center, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 3AFSSAPS, Saint-Denis, France, 4Department of Rheumatology, Leiden University Medical Centre, Leiden, The Netherlands, 5University of Leeds, 6Leeds Institute of Molecular Medicine, Chapel Allerton Hospital, Leeds, UK, 7Department of Rheumatology, Lariboisière Hospital, Assistance Publique Hôpitaux de Paris and University Paris VII, Paris, France, 8UCB Inc., Smyrna, GA, 9Medimmune Inc., Gaithersburg, MD, USA, 10Department of Rheumatology, Henri Mondor Hospital, Creteil, France, 11Department of Rheumatology, Cliniques Universitaires Saint-Luc, UCL, Brussels, 12Physiology and Pharmacology Department, University of Namur, Namur, Belgium, 13AGES PharMEd Institute Science and Information, Vienna, Austria, 14Department of Immunology and Rheumatology, Clinical Immunology Unit, Edouard Herriot Hospital, University of Lyon, Lyon, France, 15Bundesinstitut für Arzneimittel und Medizinprodukte, Bonn, Germany and 16Department of Public Health Sciences, University of Liege and CHU Centre Ville, Liege, Belgium.

Accepted 15 November 2010

Correspondence to: Josef S. Smolen, Department of Medicine 3, Division of Rheumatology, Medical University of Vienna, Waehringer Guertel 18-20, A-1090 Vienna, Austria.

E-mail: josef.smolen@wienkav.at, josef.smolen@meduniwien.ac.at

References


