



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Anticoagulation management in non-valvular atrial fibrillation in rural and remote Crete. A single-center study from the region of Sitia



KEYWORDS

Atrial fibrillation;
Antithrombotic therapy;
Anticoagulants;
Registry

Anticoagulation therapy (AT) is the cornerstone of treatment in atrial fibrillation (AF) for the prevention of possible thromboembolic events. Until recently, vitamin K antagonists (VKAs) were the main class of oral drugs used in daily clinical practice. New oral anticoagulants (NOACs) were a revolution in the management of patients suffering from non-valvular atrial fibrillation (NVAF).

Epidemiological data for AF in Greece is limited.¹ This is especially true for rural and remote areas. There is uncertainty about the effectiveness and safety of NOACs in unselected elderly patients in primary care.² The purpose of this study is to evaluate the anticoagulation therapy with NVAF that was administered to patients in the remote and rural areas of Sitia, Crete.

Our study was a single-center, 1-year prospective (from January to December 2014), observational study that enrolled consecutive patients with NVAF under anticoagulation or dual antiplatelet therapy (aspirin and clopidogrel) from the emergency department or the outpatient clinics of the Health Center – General Hospital of Sitia in Crete. It was conducted in the area of the Municipality of Sitia, which has a population of approximately 20,000 inhabitants. The study was performed according to the ethical principles for medical research involving human subjects specified in the Declaration of Helsinki. The study protocol was designed by the Health Center of Sitia and approved by the local ethics committee of our hospital.

The classification of AF as paroxysmal, persistent, or permanent was performed according to the latest ESC

guidelines for AF.³ In patients under therapy with VKAs, we retrospectively recorded the international normalized ratio (INR) values during the last six months prior to enrollment in the study. The target therapeutic range of INR was 2–3. Time in therapeutic range (TTR) was defined by two commonly used methodologies. In the first method, TTR was defined as the fraction of INRs the within target range (Method A). In the second, we used the Rosendaal linear interpolation of INR values⁴ (Method B). TTR \geq 60% was considered effective anticoagulation with VKA.

A total of 356 consecutive patients (172 men) were enrolled in our study. The demographic and clinical characteristics of the patients are shown in Table 1. The mean CHA₂DS₂-VASC³ and CHADS₂ scores³ for stroke risk were 4.63 \pm 1.54 and 3.00 \pm 1.27, respectively, while the mean HAS-BLED score³ was 3.00 \pm 1.05.

Ninety-six percent of patients with NVAF were treated with anticoagulant agents (Fig. 1). Four percent of patients received dual antiplatelet therapy. Acenocoumarol was the only VKA agent recorded in our region. Nineteen patients had changed the anticoagulation therapy from VKA to a NOAC. The reasons for this change of AT were unstable INR (8 patients), the occurrence of hemorrhagic stroke (6 patients), distance from the health care unit (3 patients) and food preferences of the patient (2 patients). Sixty-six percent of patients had regular follow-up of the arrhythmia (at least once a year), while 28% of patients had not revisited a cardiologist after the initial diagnosis of the arrhythmia.

Overall, 63.1% of patients treated with VKAs had regular measurements of INR on a monthly basis, while 2.6% of patients at the time of the enrollment were unaware of the need to measure the INR during treatment with VKAs. Appropriate data for the TTR analysis were available for 135 patients on VKA treatment. The mean TTR for all patients in our study was 43.72% and 52.36% with methods A and B, respectively. A TTR \geq 60% was observed in 30.4% of patients with method A and in 38.5% of patients with B method.

The study of rural and remote areas is interesting and challenging, as these regions usually have special cultural conditions in combination with limited access to healthcare

Peer review under responsibility of Hellenic Cardiological Society.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.hjc.2016.05.005>

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Table 1 Baseline demographic and clinical characteristics of patients.

	n=356 (100%)	Mean ± SD
Age	356 (100%)	78.47 ± 9.1
Men	172 (48.3%)	
Hypertension	317 (89%)	
Smokers	142 (39.9%)	
Active smokers	38 (10.7%)	
Ex-smokers	104 (29.2%)	
Dyslipidemia	178 (50%)	
Diabetes Mellitus	121 (34%)	
Coronary artery disease	50 (14%)	
Heart failure	221 (62%)	
NYHA I	43 (12%)	
NYHA II	144 (40.4%)	
NYHA III	28 (7.9%)	
NYHA IV	6 (1.7%)	
History of TIA / stroke*	82 (23%)	
AF type		
Paroxysmal AF	117 (32.9%)	
Persistent AF	25 (7%)	
Permanent AF	214 (60.1%)	
Other Cardiac Medications heart**		
B-blockers	183 (51.4%)	
Diltiazem	16 (4.5%)	
Digoxin	15 (4.2%)	
Propafenone	22 (6.2%)	
Amiodarone	43 (12.1%)	
Sotalol	5 (1.4%)	

NYHA: New York Heart Association; TIA: Transient ischemic attack; AF: Atrial fibrillation

* The TIA / stroke was the initial manifestation of AF for 35 patients.

** Other cardiac medications include only drugs for controlling heart rate or heart rhythm

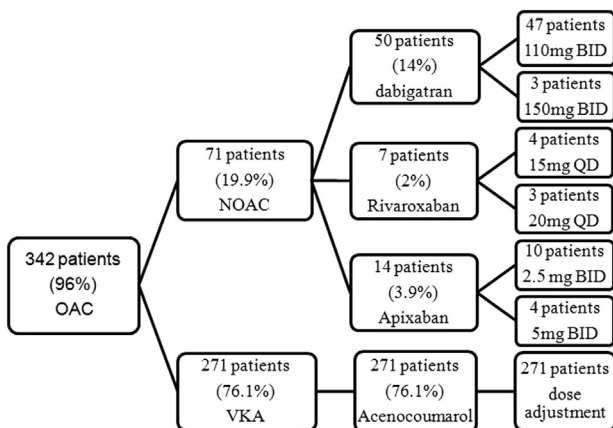


Figure 1 Anticoagulation drug therapy in study population. The percentages (%) are in reference to the total population of the study (356 patients). OAC: Oral anticoagulant; NOAC: New Oral Anticoagulant; VKA: Vitamin K antagonist; BID: bis in die; QD: quaque die.

services. RAFTING⁵ and MANAGE-AF¹ are the two largest and most representative studies of the Greek population available for the treatment of AF at the national level. The MANAGE-AF¹ is the only Greek multi-center national registry to record the use of NOACs in AF. However, in this study only one NOAC (dabigatran) was included. To the best of our knowledge, ours is the first study concerning the anti-coagulation management of NVAF in a rural and remote area of Greece where the three new available oral anti-coagulant agents (dabigatran, rivaroxaban, apixaban) were available.

In our registry, dabigatran at a reduced dose (110 mg BID) ranked first among the NOACs. Not surprisingly, the above data were expected, as dabigatran was the first NOAC approved for the treatment of NVAF. Until recently, it was not available in Greece at a dose of 150 mg. Edoxaban was not available in Greece during the registration period of the study.

Some of the most recent data in the literature concerning the use of NOACs in AF were recorded in the American PINNACLE-AF registry⁶ for a total of 150,000 patients. In this study, NOACs were used in 13% of AF patients in 2011. However, the PREFER⁷ and EORP-AF19⁸ studies recorded a smaller percentage of patients receiving NOACs (6.1% and 8.4% of patients, respectively). In the GARFIELD registry,⁹ increased use of NOACs was observed over time, with a reduction in the use of VKAs.

The average TTR observed in participating Greek patients in the RE-LY¹⁰ study was 56%. In MANAGE-AF,¹ the TTR of patients was not calculated, but indirect conclusions can be derived from the baseline mean INR value in the study population, which was 1.7±0.8. In our study, the majority of patients had TTR <60%, which shows poor adherence to treatment with VKAs.

In conclusion, most of the patients in our study were under treatment with VKAs, which require strict control to maintain the INR values in the therapeutic range. Possible reasons why this problem is not remedied by converting to NOACs may be either the reluctance of doctors to prescribe them or the unwillingness of patients in previously established therapy with VKA to convert to newer treatments. Another important factor, especially in a country in economic crisis such as Greece, is the high cost of NOACs. In our view, we believe that the establishment of national guidelines, especially in a country like Greece with its unique characteristics, will lead to a gradual harmonization of clinical practice in primary care with current European recommendations.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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7 August 2015

Available online 26 August 2016