Conducting network meta-analysis of treatments for bladder pain syndrome in adults: benefits and challenges

**BACKGROUND**

- Bladder pain syndrome (BPS) is a poorly understood clinical condition. There is no universally-accepted diagnosis and diverse causative factors have been proposed. This diversity is reflected in wide-ranging treatment options with limited evidence.
- We conducted a network meta-analysis (NMA) to evaluate the clinical effectiveness of available treatments for BPS, which have been assessed in randomised controlled trials (RCTs).
- Primary outcomes were cure or improvement of symptoms; secondary outcomes were pain, urinary frequency and nocturia.

**OBJECTIVES**

- To describe the main methodological issues encountered in the conduct of the NMA for treatments of BPS.

**METHODS**

**Literature search**

- We searched the Cochrane Incontinence Specialised Register, which contains trials identified from CENTRAL, MEDLINE, MEDLINE In-Process, MEDLINE Epub Ahead of Print, ClinicalTrials.gov, WHO ICTR and from hand searching of journals and conference proceedings (last search date: 5 June 2019). We also perused reference lists of relevant identified articles.
- No language or other restrictions were applied to the literature searches.

**Inclusion criteria**

- RCT and quasi-RCT (alternate allocation) of treatments for BPS in adults.
- All types of interventions were eligible, used either alone or in combination. These fell into three main categories:
  - Conservative (e.g., behavioural, psychological, complementary, physical).
  - Pharmacological (any route of administration, e.g., oral, intravesical, subcutaneous).
  - Surgical (e.g., injection, hydrodistension).

**Analysis**

- Random effects NMA models were fitted using WinBUGS 1.4.
- The results for each treatment versus control were compared with direct evidence from pairwise meta-analyses (PMA).

**RESULTS**

- We included 81 RCTs with a median of 38 participants (range 10 to 369). There were 65 different active treatments which were grouped into 31 treatment categories by mode of action.
- Overall, credible intervals (CrIs) from the NMA excluded the null value for six (proportion cured/improved, one pain), one (frequency) and zero (nocturia) treatment categories, respectively.
- Certainty of evidence (GRADE) was mainly defined as very low, but occasionally low or moderate.
- Figures 1 and 2 show the network diagram and results of the NMA and PMA meta-analyses, respectively, for the proportion of people cured or improved.

**Benefits and challenges of NMA**

- NMA was successfully conducted for both binary and continuous outcomes.
- The NMA approach can incorporate data from multi-arm studies and a mixture of change score and final score data for continuous outcomes (Dias 2011).
- Due to the heterogeneity in treatment and outcome definitions, a large amount of work was required to prepare the data in a suitable format.
- Is it sensible to “cancel” treatments from “A+B vs A” to “B vs control” if treatment A is a standard intervention that most patients would get anyway? A possible alternative is to conduct a component NMA (Freeman 2018).
- For most outcomes, the network was almost “star-shaped” (most trials compared an active treatment against control). The benefit of NMA may be relatively low in these situations.
- Multiple small trials meant that CrIs from NMA were often very wide.
- NMA and PMA results were similar but CrIs from NMA were often wider than CrIs from PMA because of the star-shaped network, contrary to what might be expected with a well-connected network.
- We used the CINeMA approach (CINEMA 2017) to inform GRADE.
- There is a lack of guidance on the best way to report NMAs within a Cochrane review.

**CONCLUSIONS**

- A NMA approach can be used successfully in a large complex systematic review with wide variation in treatment and outcome definitions; however, it is time-consuming and its added benefit over PMA may be relatively small especially in the presence of star-shaped networks.
- In our NMA, the small sample size of included studies hindered the interpretation of the results. Larger, more robust trials are needed to address this clinical problem.

**REFERENCES**


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Acknowledgments: Other members of the BPS review team are Yann A Dubos, Abigail Ford, and Joseph A Ogah. We thank Suzanne Freeman (Cochrane Complex Reviews Support Unit) for her advice. This review was commissioned by the NIHR Systematic Reviews Programme (project number 16/59/01). The Health Services Research Unit is supported by a core grant from the Chief Scientist Office of the Scottish Government Health Directorates. The views and opinions expressed therein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Chief Scientist Office or the Department of Health.