Clozapine, agranulocytosis, and benign ethnic neutropenia

S Rajagopal

Current knowledge and clinical implications

Clozapine is an atypical antipsychotic that is effective in treatment resistant schizophrenia. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidelines for schizophrenia specify that “in individuals with evidence of treatment resistant schizophrenia, clozapine should be introduced at the earliest opportunity.”

A severe adverse effect of clozapine that limits its more widespread use is agranulocytosis. Patients who are taking clozapine need to have their full blood counts (FBC) monitored regularly, and if the total white cell count and/or neutrophil counts indicate agranulocytosis, clozapine prescription must be terminated. Among certain ethnic groups, a significant proportion of people have a low baseline neutrophil count. This is called benign ethnic neutropenia (BEN). This editorial looks at the important issues associated with agranulocytosis and BEN in patients receiving clozapine.

Clozapine and agranulocytosis

Agranulocytosis occurs in about 1% of patients taking clozapine. Neutropenia is seen in about 3%. The risk of both agranulocytosis and neutropenia is highest between 6 weeks and 18 weeks after starting clozapine treatment. Hence, in the United Kingdom and Ireland, weekly FBC monitoring is mandatory for the first 18 weeks, after which it is done fortnightly until the end of the first year, and every four weeks thereafter. In the USA, FBC is monitored weekly for the first six months and fortnightly thereafter.

Not all risk factors are the same for agranulocytosis and neutropenia; this implies that there may be distinct mechanisms for the two disorders. A low baseline white cell count has been associated with future neutropenia but not agranulocytosis. The risk of agranulocytosis increases with age, while that of neutropenia decreases with age. Agranulocytosis is more common in black people. A white cell count spike of 15% or more above the immediately preceding measurement may predict agranulocytosis within the next 75 days. However, as these differences between the risk factors for agranulocytosis and neutropenia have been extrapolated primarily from epidemiological studies, they may be subject to change as further evidence, from even larger studies, come to light.

The exact mechanism of clozapine induced agranulocytosis is unclear. It has been postulated that clozapine is metabolised to a nitroen ion. The binding of this ion to neutrophils may result in agranulocytosis. Antineutrophil antibodies may be involved in mediating agranulocytosis. Some human leucocyte antigen (HLA) alleles, for example the HLA B38 phenotype in Ashkenazi Jews, have been shown to be associated with clozapine induced agranulocytosis.

Other haematological abnormalities

Clozapine is associated with increased risk of eosinophilia, particularly in women. Eosinophilia typically occurs between weeks 3 and 5 of treatment and resolves spontaneously without need for specific treatment. Clozapine is also associated with anaemia, lymphopenia, leucocytosis, and thrombocytopenia.

Benign ethnic neutropenia

BEN has been defined as “the occurrence of neutropenia, defined by normative data in white populations, in individuals of other ethnic groups who are otherwise healthy and who do not have repeated or severe infections”, and “about 25% to 50% of Africans and some ethnic groups in the Middle East, including Yemenite Jews and Jordanians, have BEN.” BEN has only been reported in ethnic groups that have tanned or dark skin. Subjects with BEN do not show increased incidence of infections, and their response to infections is similar to those without BEN.

Clinical implications

In the United Kingdom and Ireland, the Clozaril patient monitoring service (CPMS) supervises the prescribing of clozapine and the haematological testing (Clozaril is the brand name of clozapine). The CPMS uses a lower cut off point for patients with BEN than for the general population (table 1). A “green” alert indicates satisfactory count, an “amber” alert requires a repeat FBC test while clozapine can be continued, and a “red” alert warrants immediate cessation of clozapine.

It is important for eligible subjects to be registered with the CPMS under the BEN category, so that patients belonging to certain ethnic groups do not have to stop clozapine unnecessarily. This has great clinical ramifications, as there is no other antipsychotic that has comparable efficacy to clozapine in the treatment of resistant schizophrenia. In addition, there is evidence that some ethnic groups, particularly black people, may be less likely, even in the first place, to be prescribed clozapine. These factors may combine to further worsen the prognosis of an already severely debilitating illness in this group of patients.

As clozapine induced agranulocytosis is an idiosyncratic reaction, it is difficult to predict and to identify high risk patients. Also, as it is a comparatively rare phenomenon occurring in less than 1% of subjects, the number of reported cases is not adequate to clearly identify specific risk factors; general risk factors such as increasing age, female sex, etc, are not robust enough to change decision making in individual patients. Therefore, clinicians should continue to remain vigilant against this potentially fatal side effect of clozapine in all the patients prescribed this drug, especially in the first few months of treatment.

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Table 1 CPMS alert ranges for subjects with BEN (ranges for non-BEN subjects) | Alert colour | WCC ×10⁹/l | Neutrophils ×10⁹/l
--- | --- | --- | ---
Green | >3.0 (<3.5) | >1.5 (>2.0)
Amber | 2.5-3.0 (3.0-3.5) | 1.0-1.5 (1.5-2.0)
Red | <2.5 (<3.0) | <1.0 (<1.5)

CPMS, Clozaril patient monitoring service; BEN, benign ethnic neutropenia; WCC, white cell count.
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is particularly vulnerable to criticism—while it is the simplest within subject design, it is the least adequately controlled, and effective blinding is unlikely to be achieved. The methodological issues arising in the familiar multi-subject crossover design are well known. Borrowing terminology commonly used in that context, the observed treatment difference could equally be interpreted as a period effect, or could be distorted by carry-over. In the example given, the treatment difference could be considerably confounded by seasonal differences.

Furthermore, with regard to statistical methodology, what is the implied cut off between a “real” difference and one that could be attributable to chance? For the data as shown, an unpaired two sample t test would give a highly significant p value, around 0.0001 here, but we do not have sufficient evidence to decide whether an assumption of Gaussian distributional form is reasonable, without considerable extrapolation from data on others. The non-parametric Mann-Whitney test is robust, and yields a two sided exact p value of 1 in 35 or 0.029. This is below 0.05, but much less extreme, normally a p value of this magnitude would not be regarded as strongly convincing. A decision rule approach is more relevant. This might relate to a pre-agreed clinically importantly large difference—although this would share the non-robustness problem. Alternatively, one could abandon conventional hypothesis testing with a low α level and opt for a “pick the winner” approach with implied equal α and β rates. This corresponds more closely to the less formalised “trial and error” course of events that commonly occurs in clinical practice.

Dr Janosky’s stance contrasts quite sharply with that taken by Guyatt et al.2 This highly informative review of the appropriate use of single subject trials was restricted to double blind, randomised, multiple crossover designs aiming to optimise management of a specific patient. Decisions about efficacy were based on a combination of a signed standardised difference measure of effect size D and a single tailed p value. Although my reservation above concerning unquestioned use of parametric methods still applies. Furthermore, an effect size criterion expressed in absolute terms (for example, fasting blood glucose units) would be much more directly interpretable for clinical importance than a relative measure such as D.

Clinicians are forever “trying” patients with different treatments. Use of a single subject design, with additional rigour ensured by multiple periods, randomisation of treatments to periods and blinding, and perhaps some statistical analysis, is certainly one stage more formal and rigorous. But we should not imagine it is anything more than that: we can only validly draw conclusions about that one patient, in their present state, it would be very risky to extrapolate to ostensibly “similar” cases.


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REFERENCES

Single subject design

Single subject trials in primary care

N A Francis

Lack of generalisability limits use.

From a GP’s perspective, the accompanying article by Janine Janosky on the single subject design is both interesting and stimulating.3 This type of design, as Dr Janosky highlights, is infrequently used in research and has some potential advantages. Most notably, it is the only type of design that can provide information about effects at an individual level. There are obvious benefits in formalising what all GPs do on a day to day basis, namely observing the effects of individual treatments on individual patients. However, the article suggests a scope and potential for the n = 1 trial that I would take issue with, and the author fails to adequately describe the limits and disadvantages of this type of design.

While single subject designs have the potential of examining effects at an individual level, they do not provide data that can readily be applied to others. The author does mention that the generalisability of results from this type of study is limited, but goes on to suggest that if a subject that is “representative of the general type of patients for which this intervention would be used” then the results become more generalisable. A person can be chosen that has a certain disease at a certain stage and with certain sociodemographic characteristics. But is this person really representative? How do we know exactly which variables are relevant to the effect being shown? And how can we judge “biological representation”.

For example, are there aspects of a person’s metabolism that influences the way they respond to a drug? Furthermore, demonstrating an effect in a person, even if the person is similar to a population, provides little evidence about the probable effects of an intervention on a population, or the effects on another, inevitably unique, person.

Other potential problems with single subject trials are problems of bias and the determination of statistical significance. Effects that are likely to lead to bias in this type of trial include regression to the mean and “carry-over” effects. Values towards the extremes are likely to normalise on repetition for statistical reasons, an effect that is described as regression to the mean. This will occur without any clinical change in the subject, and in a single subject trial is likely to lead to a false impression of treatment effect when none may be present. Secondly, the author describes using a washout period between different phases of treatment. However, treatments can have lasting effects and it can be difficult to distinguish whether any prior treatments or indeed the rotation of treatments plays a part in any observed effect. Furthermore, once a subject has “changed”, how can you ever really know what you are comparing to? Can change revert back to its original state in every way? After all, you can only ever be a virgin once!

Ways of attempting to minimise bias in n = 1 trials, as the author points out,
include randomisation, blinding, and multiple treatment phases. An effect that is observed by a blinded observer, in a blinded patient, each time a treatment is randomly introduced, and that disappears each time the treatment is withdrawn, is more likely to represent a true treatment effect. However, trials that entail randomisation, blinding, and multiple phases are likely to be more difficult to implement in primary care, and more costly. Larson et al estimate the costs of formal n = 1 trials at $450 to $500 per patient. This is much less than the costs of formal n = 1 trials at $450 to and more costly. Larson et al estimate the costs of formal n = 1 trials at $450 to $500 per patient. This is much less than the costs of formal n = 1 trials at $450 to and more costly. Larson et al estimate the costs of formal n = 1 trials at $450 to $500 per patient. This is much less than the costs of formal n = 1 trials at $450 to and more costly. Larson et al estimate the costs of formal n = 1 trials at $450 to and more costly. Larson et al estimate the costs of formal n = 1 trials at $450 to

In conclusion, Janosky’s paper on single subject trials has relevance to both GP clinicians and researchers. In primary care, making treatment decisions with patients and then monitoring their response to those treatments is a daily occurrence. This, on occasion, entails a number of phases, where either different treatments or no treatment are tried. Formalising this process, and consideration of the use of blinding or placebo treatments, provides opportunities for primary care clinicians to assess the effectiveness of treatments on a person in a more comprehensive and rigorous fashion. Conducting formal n = 1 studies, compared with the informal treatment trial, can however, have significant time, cost, and ethical considerations. Given these constraints, it is unlikely that this type of trial will have wide applicability in everyday general practice. Furthermore, it must be emphasised that the results from this type of study can generally not be applied to anyone other than the person that has been studied, and that this design is particularly vulnerable to certain types of bias as described above. 


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AUTHOR’S COMMENTS

I am pleased to read the commentaries that accompany my article (see page 549). Each of the commentaries raises relevant issues that serve to illuminate the strengths and limitations of single subject research designs. As with all methodological designs, each affords strengths and limitations to answer tailored research questions. The research questions best answered, through the application of a single subject research design, are questions that garner their interest in the potential to have high internal validity while acknowledging that the external validity is most probably weak. The single subject design can be easily contrasted with a clinical trial or true randomised experimental study that aims to examine effectiveness where the strength of the design is its strong external validity. The results of these clinical trials provide conclusions regarding effectiveness on the average treatment effects for only the studied populations; however at times, the results from these clinical trials might not always be applicable in determining the most effective treatment for an individual patient. A single subject research design, although limited for external validity, provides an opportunity to examine the applicability of the study findings to a specific patient. As methodologists, having an arsenal of research designs with strengths and limitations identified for each affords us a comprehensive means to answer diverse research questions.
Should the single subject design be regarded as a valid alternative to the randomised controlled trial?
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