Reviewer’s report

Title: Acupuncture is a feasible treatment for post-thoracotomy pain: Results of a prospective pilot trial

Version: 1 Date: 4 January 2006

Reviewer: Jorge Dagnino

Reviewer’s report:

General

This is an interesting study in an area much in need of sound research as acupuncture may be effective for postoperative pain (Cherniak GV, Sessler DI. Anesthesiology 2005;102:1051) but methodological limitations of studies has limited their credibility or replicability (JAMA 1998;280:1626).

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

1) The aims of the study are not clear, both in the abstract and then in the Introduction. In Comments it is suggested that the prevention of chronic pain might be another aim for using acupuncture rather than the study. In the Abstract, efficacy is first suggested (l.4) and then safety and feasibility of doing a randomized trial are stated as objectives. In the Introduction, aims are stated as 1) Feasibility of employing acupuncture needles preoperatively, 2) Acceptance, 3) Percentage of patients providing evaluable pain data at 30 days post surgery, and 4) Adverse effects. After this, further objectives are added as “to determine the optimal timing of outcome assessments”, “to provide data to aid trial design”. Optimal timing of assessments are not addressed later. This lack of clarity ends with conclusions not clearly related to aims nor supported by the results.

2) Second paragraph in p.10 is confusing: there were no data on needle retention for two patients and a further four retained fewer than half the needles. This jeopardizes one definition of feasibility and is in direct contradiction with the starting line of the next paragraph.

3) Safety cannot be evaluated with just 25 patients and even less with the 19 that retained more than half the needles after 30 days (Hanley JA, Lippman-Hand A. JAMA 1983;249:1743).

4) Method and parameters used for sample size calculation should be stated.

5) Use of means and SD for analysis of VAS scores has been validated but it can be misleading in the lower and upper regions (ie. Mean of 1.72 and SD of 1.76 BPI pain intensity at 60 days). It might be preferable to use median values.

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

1) The title is appropriate but the Running head adds the word effective, conclusion that is not supported by this trial.

2) In the Abstract, conclusions declare the trial to be feasible but no results are given to support this. The same applies to conclusions on acceptability and interference with surgery. Line 4 of the
Methods states that “all needles were kept in place for four weeks” but this was not the case.
3) In Methods. The epidural insertion and management technique should be described.
4) Pain management after epidural catheter removal should be described.
5) P.7, l.4 “in place in place”; p.7.1 18 “wanted insure”; p.8, l.3 “operation surgery”.
6) Pain relief as part of BPI should be explained as is the fact that fewer patients have evaluable data when compared to BPI intensity and interference (Table 3).
7) On patient acceptance, stating that “fewer than five patients refused” suggests that this parameter was not evaluated prospectively.
8) Why use acupuncture in a pre-emptive fashion?
9) How do the 30 day results predict longer-term outcome? In particular, chronic post thoracotomy pain?
10) Adverse events should be described to let the reader judge that they had clearly had no relationship to acupuncture.
11) Could change of needles alter the results?
12) Table 2. Add VAS to title. Explain why Pain on cough was obtained in fewer patients.
13) Table 3. Add BPI to title and Mean and SD. Explain why BPI relief was obtained in fewer patients.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests