Reviewer's report

Title: Can homeopathy improve chemotherapy-induced emesis in early breast cancer patients? A randomized, multicentric, double-blind, placebo-controlled trial

Version: 1 Date: 25 June 2012

Reviewer: Noah Samuels

Reviewer's report:

Major Compulsory Revisions:

General:
This paper presents a very well-researched and methodologically sound study, which examines the efficacy of the homeopathic remedy Cocculine for treating CINV in breast cancer patients. The study purpose, methods and results are presented clearly and accurately, though the discussion and conclusions need to focus on the study outcomes (efficacy and safety of the study drug). They should not focus on the low rates of CINV in both study arms, which may or may not be explainable by the attention patients received. In addition, there is a need to clarify that the study drug is a “complex” and not “classic” homeopathic remedy, and controversial statements regarding the efficacy of homeopathy for other indications should be removed. Finally, the study’s limitations have not been presented, such as the low prevalence of CINV in both arms (with sample size based on a 0.5 difference); no comparison between groups for patient-related factors influencing the development of CINV (tendency for motion sickness, pre-existing anxiety, history of alcohol consumption, other factors); etc.

Title:
• should read “reduce” and not “improve” chemotherapy-induced emesis
• should read “multi-centered” and not “multicentric”

Abstract:

Conclusion
• The conclusions of the study should focus on the studied outcomes, and not the low rates of CINV in both study arms.

Background
• page 3, 2nd paragraph: the toxic effects of anti-emetic medications need to be presented, as well as contraindications to their use
• page 3, 3rd paragraph: the last sentence states that homeopathic medicines are used by patients with cancer for “symptomatic relief, general supportive care, as well as for adverse effects of cancer treatments”. This sentence needs to be clarified, since there is significant overlap between these terms, and a reference
should be provided.

• page 3, end of 3rd paragraph: Here would be a good place for an explanation of the difference between “complex homeopathy” and “classic” homeopathy. There is no need to go into a further explanation of the principles of homotoxicology.

• page 3, 4th paragraph: The first sentence needs to be supported by a reference.

Methods:

• page 5, 2nd paragraph: A more detailed description of the computer program used for randomization would further increase the methodological quality of the study (Jadad/Oxford quality scoring system)

• page 6, top of the page: A description of the placebo tablets (shape, size, etc.) should be provided.

• page 6, 3rd paragraph: references 18 and 19 should be switched with 27-28 from the current reference list.

• page 7, 1st paragraph: the term “AE” needs to be written in full the first time it is mentioned.

• same sentence: NCI-CTCAE v3.0 should have a cited reference

Results:

• page 9, 2nd and 3rd paragraphs: There seems to be a bit of confusion regarding the numbering of the tables. The numbers presented for median nausea severity (0.56 [P] vs. 0.58 [C], p=0.62) appear in Table 5 and not Table 4, as listed. The same is true for the occurrence of nausea during the 1st cycle (p=0.48), which is presented in Table 6 and not Table 4, as listed.

• page 10, 1st paragraph: the term “SAE” needs to be written in full (i.e., “severe AE”) the first time it is used.

Discussion:

• page 11, 1st paragraph, 7th line: “Several clinical trials have shown the effectiveness of homeopathic medicines in allergic rhinitis, dermatological complaints and childhood diarrhea.22” This is a very problematic statement. Subsequent studies did not concur with the conclusions of the study by Jacobs et al. regarding childhood diarrhea, and the efficacy of homeopathy for allergic rhinitis and dermatological complaints remains to be proven. Most important, this information is not relevant to the discussion of the present study’s findings, and should be removed.

• page 11, end of 1st paragraph: “Meta-analyses of clinical trials evaluating the effectiveness of homeopathic medicines…..” The conclusions of the 1991 meta-analysis by Kleijnen et al. regarding the efficacy of homeopathy (as well as the subsequent semi-positive meta-analysis by Linde et al.; Lancet 1997: 350: 834-43) have been contested in later studies. It is beyond the scope of this article to debate the efficacy of homeopathy for anything other than CINV.

• page 13, 2nd paragraph: citation #30 does not appear in the reference list.
The purpose of the study was to examine the efficacy of Cocculine on CINV, primarily following the 1st cycle of chemotherapy. The message of the paper should be that the study treatment was no better than placebo. Other study outcomes, such as the low reported frequency of CINV in both study arms, can be mentioned but should not be the focus of the discussion or conclusions reached from the results.

Acknowledgements:
• it should be mentioned who provided the study drug and the place preparation (Boiron?)

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

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