Abstract

**Purpose:** Osteonecrosis of the jaw (ONJ) is a rare but complicated side effect of antiresorptive medications. The aim of the study is to evaluate the dental and drug-related factors related to ONJ among patients on these drugs at a tertiary cancer center, India. **Methodology:** A retrospective record review of patients who received antiresorptive medication at our center from 2011 to 2014 was done. The demographic factors, type, dosage, and duration of the medication and dental history were collected, and the data were entered and analyzed using Epidata software. **Results:** A higher incidence of ONJ (8.1%) was noted in our sample (n = 183). Dental intervention after zoledronic acid (ZA) administration showed a statistical significance (P < 0.001). No significance (P value) was noted with respect to sex (0.78), age (0.28), median duration (0.9), and median dosage (0.9) of ZA. **Conclusion:** Oro-dental screening and dental monitoring shall reduce the incidence of ONJ. Within the limitations of our study, no significant relation could be pointed toward the dosage and duration of the drug and development of ONJ.

**Keywords:** Bisphosphonates, multiple myeloma, osteonecrosis of the jaw, zoledronic acid

Introduction

Osteonecrosis of the jaw (ONJ) is a complication associated with antiresorptive medications (bisphosphonates and denosumab) and antiangiogenic drugs. Patients with lytic lesions associated with multiple myeloma and solid tumors of the breast, prostate, lungs, kidney, and colon receive these medications. Although the exact mechanism for the development of ONJ remains unclear, many have hypothesized that this may be secondary to disruption of bony remodeling and angiogenesis inhibition precipitated by excessive local microtrauma in the presence of a microbiologically diverse oral environment, causing impairment of local healing.

Several risk factors of ONJ have been identified which includes drug-related factors, i.e., type of drug, dosage, duration and mode of administration, comorbidities, steroid therapy, genetic factors, tobacco and alcohol use, etc. Parenteral administration of bisphosphonates for 3 years or more increases the risk of ONJ incidence 20 times. Dental intervention/surgery is one of the strongest risk factors of ONJ. More than half of the patients with ONJ had tooth extraction as a predisposing event. Periodontal and periapical surgery and dental implants in patients receiving intravenous (IV) bisphosphonate increase the risk of ONJ by 7 fold. Dental screening and necessary dental care reduce the risk of ONJ by 50%.

However, there is a lack of scientific literature on ONJ and its risk factors in India. Most studies are confined to case reports only. Thus, the present study was carried out to study the factors associated with ONJ and the time taken for onset of ONJ after initiation of antiresorptive medications at a tertiary cancer center in India.

Methodology

**Study design**

This was a retrospective cohort study involving review of patient case records.

**Study setting**

Kerala is a state in South India with a population of 33.4 million, spread over 14
districts. Kannur district is in northern part of the state with a population of 2.5 million.[21] The incidence of cancer in Kannur is increasing with a crude incidence rate of 33.8/100,000, and the cancer care is being catered by both public and private health facilities.[22]

Specific setting
Malabar Cancer Center (MCC) is an autonomous institution under the Government of Kerala which was established in the year 2001 to provide state-of-the-art oncology care to patients from Kerala and neighboring states such as Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. It caters to around 70,000 cancer patients every year.

Multiple myeloma and solid tumor patients with skeletal metastasis are routinely planned for initiation of antiresorptive medication to reduce pain and skeletal-related events by the medical oncologists. The department of dentistry and rehabilitation is involved in oro-dental screening and necessary dental treatments for all the registered cancer patients.

Study period
This study was conducted from June 2016 to December 2016.

Study population
All multiple myeloma patients and patients with solid tumors who received antiresorptive medication during January 2011 to December 2014 at MCC and were followed up for at least 1 year were included in the study.

Exclusion criteria
Patients who died or were lost to follow up within 1 year of initiation of antiresorptive medication and those with previous history of radiotherapy to head and neck region were excluded from the study.

Operational definitions
Osteonecrosis of the jaw
According to the American Academy of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons,[11] Patients may be considered to have medication-related osteonecrosis of the Jaw (MRONJ) if all of the following three characteristics are present:
1. Current or previous treatment with antiresorptive or antiangiogenic agents
2. Exposed bone or bone that can be probed through an intraoral or extraoral fistula (e) in the maxillofacial region that has persisted for more than 8 weeks
3. No history of radiation therapy to the jaws or obvious metastatic disease to the jaws.

Figures 1 and 2 represent the clinical and radiographic picture of MRONJ.

Antiresorptive medication
Medications inhibit bone resorption and/or favor bone mineralization and bone regeneration.

Results
Among 183 patients on IV zoledronic acid (ZA) and followed up for 1 year, 15 developed ONJ. Only
2 patients underwent dental screening before starting medication (data not tabulated). Dental intervention emerged as a significant risk factor for the onset of ONJ ($P < 0.001$). Median (interquartile range) duration and cumulative dosage of ZA for the onset of ONJ were $14$ ($10–23$) months and $56$ ($40–92$) mg, respectively. Intake of steroids ($P = 0.12$) and comorbid diabetes ($P = 0.8$) failed to show a statistically significant association with the onset of ONJ. The median time of onset time for ONJ was $683$ ($429–1169$) days [Table 1].

Figure 1 shows that $50\%$ of the cases of ONJ developed within $483$ days of starting antiresorptive medication.

Table 2 shows the detailed patient-wise clinical profile, treatment, and follow-up status of patients taking ZA who developed ONJ.

Figures 2 and 3 represent the clinical and radiographic pictures of ONJ related to bisphosphonates.

**Discussions**

The retrospective study analyzed the drug-related and dental-related factors related to ONJ in patients on ZA therapy. The cumulative drug dosage or drug administration duration was not showing any difference in the two groups. The effect of drug type could not be assessed as all the patients received a single type of drug. More than $50\%$ of the patients who developed ONJ had some form of dental interventions after initiation of the drug.

The higher incidence of ONJ in breast cancer patients ($5\%$) and multiple myeloma patients ($8\%$) is in consensus with the study by Vandone et al.$^{[19]}$ The primary disease was insignificant as in other studies.$^{[12]}$

Published literature suggests that the risk of ONJ increases with dosage and duration of drug administration.$^{[2-5,12,13]}$ All our patients received ZA ranging from $5$ to $33$ months with a mean onset duration of ONJ at $15$ months.

Exclusion of patients who did not complete a minimum $1$-year follow-up might be the reason for the statistical insignificance.

Dental screening before initiating antiresorptive medication and regular dental monitoring reduces the risk of ONJ.$^{[23,24]}$ The screening and necessary dental treatment would minimize the need for any surgical dental procedures later. Restorative and endodontic treatment and oral prophylaxis can be done safely in patients on antiresorptive medications. Dental extractions, dental implants, periodontal disease, poorly fitting dentures, and bony exostoses are the precipitating risk factors for ONJ.$^{[12]}$ Our sample ($99\%$) lacked dental screening which...

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**Table 1:** Factors associated with development of osteonecrosis of the jaw among patients on zoledronic acid at Malabar Cancer Center, Thalassery, Kerala, India, from 2011-2014

| Characteristics | ONJ ($n=15$) | No ONJ ($n=168$) | $P$ |
|-----------------|-------------|-----------------|-----|
| Median age in years (interquartile range) | $54$ ($50-60$) | $60$ ($52-66$) | 0.28 |
| Sex, $n$ (%) | | | |
| Male | $5$ ($33$) | $62$ ($37$) | 0.78 |
| Female | $10$ ($67$) | $106$ ($63$) | |
| Primary disease, $n$ (%) | | | |
| Breast cancer | $5$ ($33$) | $70$ ($42$) | 0.27 |
| Multiple myeloma | $8$ ($53$) | $56$ ($33$) | |
| Others | $2$ ($13$) | $42$ ($25$) | |
| Median duration of ZA in months (interquartile range) | $14$ ($10-23$) | $15$ ($12-20$) | 0.9 |
| Median cumulative dosage of ZA in mg (interquartile range) | $56$ ($40-92$) | $60$ ($48-79$) | 0.9 |
| Median time of onset of ONJ in days (interquartile range) | $683$ ($429-1169$) | - | |
| Dental intervention, $n$ (%) | $9$ ($60$) | $13$ ($8$) | $<0.001$ |
| Steroid administration, $n$ (%) | $8$ ($53$) | $57$ ($34$) | 0.12 |
| Comorbid diabetes, $n$ (%) | $2$ ($13$) | $21$ ($13$) | 0.8 |

ONJ: Osteonecrosis of the jaw; ZA: Zoledronic acid
Table 2: Clinical profile of patients on zoledronic acid who developed osteonecrosis of the jaw at Malabar Cancer Center, Thalassery, Kerala, India, from 2011-2014

| Patient number | Diagnosis          | Age number | Sex  | ZA dosage (mg) | Onset of ONJ (days) | Dental interventions | Site(s) of ONJ                        | Treatment of ONJ | Status of ONJ lesion | Follow-up status (as of December 2016) |
|----------------|--------------------|------------|------|----------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1              | Multiple myeloma   | 50         | Male | 132            | 1525                | None                 | Posterior mandible                    | Conservative     | No progression        | On follow-up                        |
| 2              | Multiple myeloma   | 50         | Female | 96             | 1615                | Restorative          | Posterior mandible                    | Conservative     | No progression        | On follow-up                        |
| 3              | Multiple myeloma   | 77         | Male | 40             | 379                 | Extractions          | Posterior mandible                    | Surgical         | Resolution            | Lost to follow-up                   |
| 4              | Multiple myeloma   | 51         | Female | 96             | 1026                | Surgical             | Posterior mandible                    | Conservative     | No progression        | On follow-up                        |
| 5              | Multiple myeloma   | 60         | Female | 32             | 429                 | None                 | Posterior maxilla and anterior mandible | Conservative     | No progression        | On follow-up                        |
| 6              | Multiple myeloma   | 59         | Male | 80             | 926                 | Surgical             | Posterior mandible                    | Conservative     | Resolution            | On follow-up                        |
| 7              | Multiple myeloma   | 54         | Female | 92             | 475                 | Extractions          | Posterior mandible                    | Conservative     | No progression        | Lost to follow-up                   |
| 8              | Multiple myeloma   | 49         | Female | 56             | 1169                | Restorative          | Posterior mandible                    | Conservative     | No progression        | On follow-up                        |
| 9              | Breast cancer      | 71         | Female | 48             | 1245                | None                 | Posterior mandible                    | Conservative     | Resolution            | Lost to follow-up                   |
| 10             | Breast cancer      | 54         | Female | 92             | 691                 | Extractions          | Posterior mandible                    | Conservative     | No progression        | On follow-up                        |
| 11             | Breast cancer      | 39         | Female | 60             | 440                 | None                 | Posterior mandible                    | Conservative     | Not available          | Lost to follow-up                   |
| 12             | Breast cancer      | 44         | Female | 36             | 283                 | Conservative         | Posterior maxilla and anterior mandible | Conservative     | No progression        | On follow-up                        |
| 13             | Breast cancer      | 58         | Female | 48             | 441                 | None                 | Posterior mandible                    | Conservative     | Progression           | On follow-up                        |
| 14             | Prostate cancer    | 78         | Male  | 32             | 683                 | None                 | Posterior mandible                    | Conservative     | No progression        | Lost to follow-up                   |
| 15             | Prostate cancer    | 52         | Male  | 48             | 294                 | Restorative          | Posterior mandible                    | Conservative     | Not available          | Lost to follow-up                   |

1Implies use of antibiotics. ZA: Zoledronic acid; ONJ: Osteonecrosis of the jaw

might have necessitated dental extractions (45%) in due course that resulted in ONJ. A study by Montefusco et al. suggested that prophylactic antibiotics before and during dental procedures may reduce the risk of developing ONJ.[23]

Our data are also in consensus for site of ONJ.[12,24] Less vascularity and dense bone of the mandible might have triggered the onset of ONJ. After any dental surgeries, a minimum healing period of 3 weeks is suggested before starting antiresorptive medication.

The study being a retrospective record review has got its inherent defects in the design. Lack of in-house dental treatment facility than at our center did not provide any oro-dental screening or oral care instructions for the patients. The effect of drug type could not be assessed as all the patients received ZA alone. Missing entries in patient’s record might have excluded the patients too.

The greatest strength of the study is that it could be used as a baseline data upon which further prospective trails can be planned. Most of the published studies are related to Western population and our data will provide an insight to the risk factors among Indian population. These data may be extrapolated for initiating a standard protocol for dental care of patients planned for antiresorptive medications at our center. Thus, the incidence of ONJ and the possible need for discontinuation of medications can be certainly avoided. The risk factors and treatment strategies for ONJ need for discontinuation of the medication and overall patients’ response to cancer treatment should be put for further study prospectively.

Conclusion

Dental intervention after initiation of antiresorptive medication is a significant risk factor for the onset of ONJ. Duration and dosage of ZA therapy were not related to...
the development of ONJ. Dental screening and necessary dental treatment before initiation of the drug should be a mandate.

Acknowledgment

The authors acknowledge Academy for Public Health, Kozhikode, Kerala, India; MCC, Thalassery, Kerala, India; and The Centre for Operational Research, International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease, France, for their support and guidance throughout the study which was a part of SORT-IT([structured operational research and training initiative] program. This course is under the umbrella of the World Health Organization-TDR for capacity building in low- and middle-income countries.

Declaration of patient consent

The authors certify that they have obtained all appropriate patient consent forms. In the form, the patients have given consent for images and other clinical information to be reported in the journal. The patients understand that name and initials will not be published and due efforts will be made to conceal identity, but anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

Financial support and sponsorship

This study was financially supported by Academy for Public Health, Kozhikode, Kerala, India; MCC, Thalassery, Kerala, India; and the Centre for Operational Research, International Union against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease, France.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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