EDITORIAL COMMENT

Drug repurposing in autosomal dominant polycystic kidney disease: back to the future with pioglitazone

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ABSTRACT

Autosomal dominant polycystic kidney disease (ADPKD) is the most common inherited cause of end-stage kidney failure. At present, only one drug, tolvaptan, has been approved for use to slow disease progression, but its use is limited by reduced tolerability and idiosyncratic liver toxicity. Thiazolidinediones were first developed as insulin-sensitizers but also regulate gene transcription in multiple tissues, leading to systemic effects on metabolism, inflammation and vascular reactivity. In this issue, Blazer-Yost et al. report the results of a single-centre Phase 1b double-blind placebo-controlled crossover study of the peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor γ (PPAR-γ) agonist pioglitazone in 18 ADPKD patients. Encouragingly, there were no major safety signals, although evidence of efficacy could not be demonstrated due to the small sample size. We review the preclinical evidence for the use of PPAR-γ agonists in ADPKD and speculate on the likely beneficial and adverse clinical effects of this interesting class of compounds in a future trial.

Keywords: ADPKD, clinical trial, diabetes mellitus, magnetic resonance imaging, polycystic kidney disease

INTRODUCTION

Autosomal dominant polycystic kidney disease (ADPKD) is the most common inherited cause of end-stage kidney failure [1]. It has an estimated clinical prevalence of <1 in 2000, although its genetic prevalence could be higher due to many asymptomatic undiagnosed cases in the general population [2]. Around 10% of patients on renal replacement therapy have ADPKD, making it a disease of considerable personal, societal and economic impact. At present, only one drug, tolvaptan, has been approved for use to slow disease progression, but its use is limited by reduced tolerability and idiosyncratic liver toxicity [3]. Therefore alternative drugs (for those intolerant to tolvaptan) and combination approaches (to reduce its side effects and maximize efficacy) are urgently needed.

Thiazolidinediones (TZDs) were first developed as insulin sensitizers to improve glycaemic control in patients with Type 2 diabetes mellitus. They function as agonists of peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor γ (PPAR-γ), which dimerizes with retinoic acid receptor A to form a co-repressor complex regulating the transcription of multiple target genes (Figure 1) [4]. The most widely prescribed TZDs, pioglitazone and rosiglitazone, have been widely used as second-line agents to control glycaemia in diabetic patients. Beyond glycaemic control, anti-proteinuric effects have been observed in diabetic nephropathy and other forms of glomerulonephritis such as immunoglobulin A nephropathy and focal segmental glomerulosclerosis [4]. More recently, their use has become more restricted due to an increased incidence of death and heart failure [5, 6]. TZDs block
both epithelial sodium channel–dependent and –independent sodium excretion, leading to oedema as a common side effect of treatment that can in turn exacerbate incipient heart failure [7, 8].

In this issue, Blazer-Yost et al. report the results of a single-centre Phase 1b double-blind placebo-controlled crossover study of the PPAR-γ pioglitazone in 18 ADPKD patients (ClinicalTrials.gov NCT02697617) [9]. A low dose (15 mg) of pioglitazone or placebo was given for 12 months each with a transition to the opposite arm after a short washout period. The primary endpoints were to monitor the known side effects of PPAR-γ agonists and included incident episodes of fluid retention, heart failure, liver toxicity and hypoglycaemia. Secondary endpoints were to assess changes in total kidney volume (TKV), blood pressure (BP) and kidney function (estimated glomerular filtration rate determined with the Chronic Kidney Disease Epidemiology Collaboration equation).

Fifteen patients (83%) completed the 2-year study with 3 dropouts (17%) due to unspecified personal reasons (two patients at Months 3 or 12) or pregnancy (one patient at Month 6): all 18 patients were included in the safety analysis. Encouragingly, there were no major safety signals, i.e. episodes of heart failure or liver toxicity. Secondary endpoints were to assess changes in total kidney volume (TKV), blood pressure (BP) and kidney function (estimated glomerular filtration rate determined with the Chronic Kidney Disease Epidemiology Collaboration equation).

In conclusion, low-dose pioglitazone (15 mg) was found to be safe when given to a small cohort of ADPKD patients with early but rapidly progressive disease over 12 months. The risk of hypoglycaemia appeared to be mitigated at this dose, although exposure to a larger population with a wider range of age and kidney function could yet unmask a higher incident rate. The lack of increased oedema and heart failure was reassuring given concerns regarding cardiac safety signals unmasked in clinical trials of PPAR-γ agonists in diabetic patients [6].

The lack of efficacy on the main exploratory outcome of annual TKV growth was likely related to an insufficient sample size, although the additional possibility that a suboptimal dose was used cannot be excluded. The authors designed their study based on data suggesting that a lower dose of pioglitazone was more effective than a higher dose in rodent PKD models, arguing that the basis for this is a specific effect on cystic fibrosis transmembrane conductance regulator (CFTR) messenger RNA
Despite this premise, it is apparent that a consistent effect of PPAR-\( \gamma \) agonists has not been found in all PKD rodent models tested so far, including orthologous ones (Table 1). In addition, both pleiotropic systemic and renal effects of these compounds beyond CFTR are likely given the widespread tissue and limited nephron expression of PPAR-\( \gamma \) (Figure 1).

The stage is now set for a Phase 2 parallel-arm multicentre trial of pioglitazone in ADPKD. With no options to slow disease progression in the last 150 years, new treatment possibilities for ADPKD are now rapidly emerging, including drug-repurposing approaches [20, 21]: PPAR-\( \gamma \) agonists could yet find a new lease on life in the treatment of ADPKD.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Z.M. acknowledges funding from the National Natural Science Foundation of China (82070705 and 81770670). A.C.M.O. acknowledges support from the Medical Research Council (UK), Kidney Research UK and the Sheffield Kidney Research Foundation.

**FUNDING**

A.C.M.O. has received research funding from ONO and Otsuka, lecture fees from Otsuka and consultancy fees from Sanofi-Genzyme, Galapagos and Mironid as a member of scientific advisory boards and steering committees outside the scope of this work. All grants and fees have been paid to his institution.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

The results presented in this article have not been published previously in whole or part, except in abstract format.

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**Table 1. Preclinical studies of TZDs in PKD rodent models**

| References | Drug and dosing (mg/kg/day) | Model and gender (M/F) | Age and treatment duration | Reduction in %KW (Y/N/NA) | Effect on BP (Y/N/NA) | Adverse events | Extrarenal effects |
|------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| Muto et al. [12] | Pioglitazone (80) | Pkd1 null (M, F) | E 7.5 (2 days) | NA | NA | None | Improved survival; decreased oedema, cardiac defects |
| Raphael et al. [13] | Pioglitazone (40) | Pkd1 hets (M, F) | Week 16 (6 M) | NA | N (10 M) | None | Improved aortic EDD |
| Dai et al. [14] | Rosiglitazone (10) | Han: SPRD (Cy/–) rat (M) | Week 3 (8 weeks, 6–18 M) | Y (8 weeks) | Y (6 M) | None | Improved survival; increased heart and decreased liver weights >6 M |
| Blazer-Yost et al. [15] | Pioglitazone (4, 20) | PCK rat (M, F) | Week 3 (7 weeks) | Y (M) at 7 weeks both doses | NA | None | Decreased fractional liver weights at low dose |
| Yoshihara et al. [16] | Pioglitazone (20) | PCK rat (f) | Week 4 (14 weeks) | Y (f) | NA | None | Decreased fractional liver weights |
| Flaig et al. [17] | Rosiglitazone (4, 0.4, 0.04) | PCK rat (M, F) | Week 4 (24 days) | Y (0.04 mg/kg group only) | NA | Mortality in 4 mg/kg group due to cholangitis |
| Pioglitazone (2, 0.2) | Wpk rat (M, F) | PN 5 (14 days) | Y (0.2 mg/kg group only) | NA | Decreased heart weights in 0.2 mg/kg group |
| Kanhai et al. [18] | Pioglitazone (30) | iKspCre-Pkd1 del mice (PN18–19 induced) (M, F) | Week 5 (9–11 weeks) | N | NA | None | NA |

M, male; F, female; Y, yes; N, no; NA, not assessed; EDD, endothelium-dependent dilatation; BW, body weight; E, embryonic; PN, post-natal.
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