Research Article

Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis Symptom Score in Integrative Treatments (ALS-SSIT) for Evaluating Therapeutic Effect of Traditional Chinese Medicine: A Prospective Study

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Objective. To evaluate the reliability, validity, sensitivity, and clinical applicability of a new scale—the amyotrophic lateral sclerosis symptom score in integrative treatments (ALS-SSIT)—for measuring the effect of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) in patients with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS).

Methods. A total of 160 patients with ALS were enrolled and followed up for 6 months. All patients received TCM. Patients were evaluated at enrollment and at the end of 6 months with a new scale, the ALS-SSIT, developed after extensive consultations with TCM experts with several years of experience in the treatment of ALS. The 36-item Medical Outcomes Study Short Form (SF-36) scale and the amyotrophic lateral sclerosis functional rating scale (ALSFRS) were used as the reference standards. Results. The acceptance rate and completion rate of the ALS-SSIT scale were high, and the content validity was confirmed by experts. Test-retest performed at enrollment and at 6 months showed good reliability of the ALS-SSIT scale (Cronbach α, 0.9172 and 0.9181, respectively). The ALS-SSIT scale score showed significant change at 6 months, indicating the ability to reflect the change in disease severity. Conclusion. The ALS-SSIT appears to be a feasible, reliable, and sensitive tool for the evaluation of the effect of TCM in patients with ALS.

1. Introduction

Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) is a rapidly progressive neurodegenerative disease. At present, there is no effective cure or method to halt progression. In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), ALS is classified as a “flaccidity syndrome” (“Wei Zheng” in Chinese). Some previous studies suggest that patients with ALS may benefit from TCM [1, 2]. However, there are differences between TCM and Western medicine in the diagnosis of ALS and in the evaluation of treatment response. There are still no objective criteria for diagnosis of ALS or for assessing disease progression or predicting the clinical outcome. Different scoring systems are used to assess response to treatment, but the scales used in Western medicine do not reflect fully the improvement achieved with TCM [3]. Our research team, which has more than 20 years of experience in the use of TCM for the treatment of ALS, has developed an evaluation scale that we consider more appropriate for evaluating the efficacy of TCM treatment of ALS.

The aim of this study was to summarize the advantages and disadvantages of the currently used ALS evaluation scales and to test the feasibility, reliability, and sensitivity of the new scale on a cohort of patients with ALS. Ethical approval of the study protocol was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Shuguang Hospital (EA-SG2018-04-226). The trial registration number is ChiCTR2000037353.
2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Patients. For this prospective study, we enrolled 160 patients with ALS from the outpatient department and ward of Shuguang Hospital affiliated to Shanghai University of Traditional Chinese Medicine. The inclusion criteria were (1) ALS diagnosed according to the Diagnostic Criteria for Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis of the Neurology Branch of the Chinese Medical Association [4]; (2) age 20-80 years; (3) disease onset within the past 5 years (including patients who had undergone gastrostomy surgery or received noninvasive ventilator support); (4) patient and/or family willing to comply with study requirements with regard to observation, treatment, and follow-up; and (5) written informed consent signed by patient/family members. The exclusion criteria were (1) other concurrent neurological diseases (e.g., Parkinson disease, Alzheimer disease, and frontotemporal dementia); (2) psychiatric illness; (3) uncontrolled serious disease of the heart, liver, kidney, hematopoietic system, or endocrine system; or (4) pregnancy or lactation.

All patients received TCM, which included herbal medicines or Chinese patent medicines, acupuncture, massage therapy, and other measures, either continuously or intermittently. The patients were followed up for 6 months.

2.2. Scales. Health and function were evaluated at enrollment and at the end of 6 months, using three different scales: the 36-item Medical Outcomes Study Short Form (SF-36) scale, the amyotrophic lateral sclerosis functional rating scale (ALSFRS), and the newly developed amyotrophic lateral sclerosis symptom score in integrative treatments (ALS-SSIT) scale.

2.2.1. The SF-36. The SF-36 scale is a non-disease-specific evaluation scale that is widely used in China, mainly for evaluating the general health of populations with chronic diseases and the impact of treatment on health and quality of life. The scale comprises 36 questions that assess different aspects of physical health (physical functioning, physical role, bodily pain, and general health) and mental health (vitality, social function, emotional role, and mental health). Higher scores indicate better physical and mental health [5]. This scale was one of the reference standards for evaluating the validity of the ALS-SSIT scale.

2.2.2. ALSFRS. The ALSFRS is an internationally accepted standard tool for monitoring disability in patients with ALS [6]. It can be applied to patients treated with Western medicine, Chinese medicine, or integrative medicine. The scale covers assessments functioning in four domains, with a total of 12 items, as follows: (A) oropharyngeal function: (1) speech, (2) salivation, and (3) swallowing; (B) life function: (4) handwriting, (5) cutting food and handling utensils, and (6) dressing and hygiene; (C) motor function: (7) turning in bed and adjusting bed clothes, (8) walking, and (9) climbing stairs; and (D) breathing function: (11) dyspnea, (12) orthopnea, and (13) respiratory insufficiency. Each item is scored on a scale of 0 (severely impaired) to 4 (normal); thus, the total score can range from 0 (severely impaired) to 48 (normal). This scale is widely used in Western medicine to evaluate the treatment of ALS. In this study, this scale was used to assess the validity of the ALS-SSIT.

2.2.3. ALS-SSIT. The ALS-SSIT integrates methods from Chinese and Western medicine. We invited neurologists from China and abroad to participate in the development of this evaluation scale. The scale is different from ALSFRS, which is based only on the degree of impairment or dysfunction of the activities of daily living. The ALS-SSIT includes three parts, each focusing on different aspects of bodily function. The functions evaluated and the scores are listed below:

(a) Oropharyngeal function:

(1) Speech (normal = 0; occasional hoarse voice, which does not affect daily life = 1; often has hoarse voice, which affects daily life = 2; continuous hoarse voice and unclear pronunciation, which affects life = 3; unable to speak clearly and communicate, which seriously affects life = 4)

(2) Swallowing (normal = 0; occasional choking, which does not affect daily life = 1; often has choking, with slow swallowing, which affects daily life = 2; often has choking, eating time is significantly prolonged, tolerates semiliquid diet, which has moderate effect on daily life = 3; unable to swallow, which has serious effect on daily life = 4)

(3) Drooling of saliva (none = 0; occasional, but no impact on daily life = 1; always, but no effect on daily life = 2; always, with effect on daily life = 3; always, with serious effect on daily life = 4)

(b) Muscle function:

(4) Head and neck lifting weakness (lifting freely = 0; occasional weakness, which does not affect life = 1; frequent weakness, which affects life = 2; continuous weakness, needs help to maintain posture after raising the head = 3; always, which seriously affects life, needs help to maintain posture after head raising = 4)

(5) Limb mobility disorder (normal = 0; occasional muscle weakness, which does not affect life = 1; upper or lower limb weakness, muscle atrophy, no help needed for daily activities = 2; muscle weakness, muscle atrophy, some activities need help = 3; complete wheelchair life, all activities need help = 4)

(6) Muscle fasciculations (none = 0; occasionally, which does not affect life = 1; always, which does not affect life = 2; always, which affects life = 3; always, which seriously affects life = 4)
3. Results

3.1. Feasibility. There were no significant differences between the three scales (SF-36, ALSFRS, and ALS-SSIT) in the acceptance rate, completion rate, and completion time at baseline and at 6 months (Table 1).

3.2. Reliability Analysis. The ALS-SSIT scale was applied twice at each time point (i.e., at enrollment and at 6 months); the Cronbach α for the whole scale was 0.9172 and 0.9181, respectively, indicating high consistency. Table 2 shows the Cronbach α coefficient for each field.

3.3. Validity Analysis

3.3.1. Content Validity. The ALS-SSIT scale was designed with the help of a team of experts with many years of experience in the diagnosis and treatment of ALS in Chinese medicine. The score was based on the responses of the patients and the investigation results. The scoring system was reviewed and approved by Chinese and foreign professional bodies, including the Chronic Disease Neurology Committee and Neuroendocrine Committee of the Shanghai Society of Integrated Traditional Chinese and Western Medicine, the NeuroimmunoLOGY Committee of the Shanghai Immunological Society, and the Neurology Branch of the Shanghai Society of Traditional Chinese Medicine. All experts agreed that the ALS-SSIT scale provides a comprehensive assessment of ALS and that the individual items are easy for patients or family members to understand. Thus, this scale has admissible validity.

3.3.2. Standard Validity. The SF-36 and ALSFRS were used as the calibration standard. The ALS-SSIT score was negatively correlated with the SF-36 score at enrollment and at 6 months (correlation coefficient, −0.316 and −0.392, respectively) and also with the ALSFRS score (correlation coefficients, −0.412 and −0.397, respectively).

3.4. Sensitivity of ALS-SSIT. The results of the paired sample t-test showed that the total scores of the two tests of the ALS-SSIT scale (both the previous one) were significantly different (P = 0.0382), and the total score of the second time was greater than the total score of the first time, indicating that the scale can reflect that the disease degree of ALS is getting worse over time. And it is opposite to the change direction of the SF-36 and ALSFRS scales. While the total distribution of the SF-36 scale as a reference has a statistical difference from the sample’s t-test (P = 0.0497), and the total score of the ALSFRS scale has no statistical difference (P = 0.0623). Statistically significant changes were seen in the mean scores for each area of the ALS-SSIT (oropharyngeal function, muscle function, and nonmotor symptoms); the P values were 0.0514, 0.0429, and 0.0393, respectively. The P value of the paired sample t-test for the physiological condition field and the vitality field of the SF-36 scale as a reference was 0.0452 and 0.0496, respectively. Although the mean scores of areas and subfields of the ALSFRS scale also indicated increased disease severity at 6 months, the changes were not statistically significant. The items in the ALS-SSIT

(7) Rigidity of limbs (none = 0; occasionally, which does not affect life = 1; often, which does not affect life = 2; always, which affects life = 3; always, which seriously affects life = 4)

(c) Nonmotor symptoms

(8) Abnormal urination (normal = 0; occasionally frequent urination or weak urination, which does not affect life = 1; frequent urination abnormalities, occasionally affecting life = 2; frequent urination, urgency or urination weakness, which affects life = 3; abnormal urination or need for catheterization, which seriously affects life = 4)

(9) Insomnia (none = 0; occasionally, which does not affect life = 1; often, which does not affect life = 2; always, which affects life = 3; always, which seriously affects life = 4)

(10) Emotional and mental disorders (none = 0; occasional, which does not affect life = 1; often, which does not affect life = 2; always, which affects life = 3; always, which seriously affects life = 4)

The total score can range from 0 (normal) to 40 (severely damaged), with a higher score indicating greater impact on daily life.

2.3. Reliability Evaluation. To determine the reliability of the ALS-SSIT, patients were evaluated twice at each time point (i.e., at enrollment and at 6 months), with a 30-minute interval between evaluations. The Cronbach α coefficient was used to assess internal consistency.

2.4. Validity Evaluation. Content validity and standard validity of the ALS-SSIT scale were analyzed. Content validity mainly guarantees the accuracy of question formulation during application of the scale. Standard validity was assessed using SF-36 and ALSFRS as the reference standards.

2.5. Sensitivity Evaluation. The sensitivity of the total scale, each field, and each item was analyzed.

2.6. Coherence Analysis. The three scales were applied at enrollment and then again 30 minutes later. The difference in mean scores was analyzed. The ALS-SSIT scale was applied twice at each evaluation, so as to assess its consistency; the ALS-SSIT score at the first evaluation was used for comparison with the SF-36 and ALSFRS scales.

2.7. Statistical Analysis. SPSS 19.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA) was used for statistical analysis. Measurement data were expressed as means ± standard deviation and compared using the independent-samples t-test. Count data were expressed as counts and percentages; nonranked data were compared by the chi-squared test and graded data by Ridit analysis. Statistical significance was at P < 0.05.
Table 1: Acceptance rate, completion rate, and completion time of the three scales at enrollment and at 6 months.

| Item          | Acceptance rate (%) | Completion rate (%) | Completion time of each item (s) |
|---------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| SF-36         | At enrollment       | 96.77               | 97.26                           |
|               | At 6 months         | 96.49               | 96.93                           |
| ALSFRS        | At enrollment       | 98.37               | 98.21                           |
|               | At 6 months         | 97.65               | 96.51                           |
| ALS-SSIT      | At enrollment       | 99.36               | 99.87                           |
|               | At 6 months         | 99.92               | 99.94                           |

Note: SF-36: 36-item short-form health survey; ALSFRS: amyotrophic lateral sclerosis functional rating scale; ALS-SSIT: amyotrophic lateral sclerosis symptom score in integrative treatments.

Table 2: Cronbach α coefficients for consistency in each field of the ALS-SSIT scale.

| Field                  | Item no. | Test 1 | Test 2 |
|------------------------|----------|--------|--------|
| Oropharyngeal function | 3        | 0.8347 | 0.8926 |
| Muscle function        | 4        | 0.8038 | 0.9006 |
| Nonmotor symptoms      | 3        | 0.7965 | 0.8352 |

ALS-SSIT: amyotrophic lateral sclerosis symptom score in integrative treatments.

that showed significant change at 6 months included dysarthria (P = 0.0419), dysphagia (P = 0.0378), weakness of head and neck lift (P = 0.0451), limb movement disorder (P = 0.0489), insomnia (P = 0.0477), and mood disorders and mental disorders (P = 0.0367). A few items in the SF-36 and ALSFRS scales also showed statistically significant change.

3.5. Analysis of the Coherence of Scale to Disease. The paired sample t-test results showed that the difference in the total score of the ALS-SSIT scale between the two tests was statistically significant (P = 0.0382); the overall difference P value of the SF-36 scale was 0.0497, while the ALSFRS scale did not show the difference before and after.

4. Discussion

Clinical evaluation of ALS and of response to treatment is still done using different scoring scales. Several experts with many years of experience in treating ALS with TCM believe that the combination of TCM and Western medicine can alleviate symptoms and delay disease progression, but the currently used scales will not be able to detect these changes. Hence, there is a need for more sensitive evaluation tools. In the present study, the acceptance rate and completion rate of the ALS-SSIT scale exceeded 99% (Table 1). The ALS-SSIT scores showed a good linear correlation with the widely recognized SF-36 scale and the ALSFRS scale. The scale was also found to have good consistency and high sensitivity and validity. Statistically significant changes in the overall score and the scores for individual items after 6 months of treatment with TCM show that the ALS-SSIT scale can sensitively detect improvements in ALS signs/symptoms.

As is true of other neurodegenerative diseases, the clinical course of ALS varies widely. According to TCM, most neurodegenerative diseases are due to yang deficiency of the spleen and kidney and are associated with phlegm, dampness, and blood stasis. These conditions belong to the primary asthenia–secondary asthenia syndrome and show slow continuous progress [7]. Western medicine often focuses on the main symptoms and signs and does not give sufficient importance to symptoms related to the spleen and kidney (according to TCM). However, TCM can improve these symptoms [8]. With increasing emphasis on TCM in recent years in China, the concept of syndromic management of neurological diseases is gradually being accepted by the medical community [9, 10].

The evaluation scale that we have developed for ALS could be a convenient tool for future clinical research in ALS. However, our study has limitations. Firstly, due to conditional limitations and some data gaps in postanalysis, we have not performed the structural validity verification of the ALS-SSIT factor models. Secondly, nor has it completed the calculation of the diagnostic threshold of the scale, such as the receiver operating characteristic curve (ROC curve) and the calculation of the sensitivity and specificity associated with it [11]. Thirdly, our clinical scale study did not classify ALS in detail. It is well known that there are many subtypes of ALS and the progresses of different types of ALS at different rates. This is also the purpose of our next study. When evaluating the efficacy of TCM, qualitative criteria are mostly used. Lack of reliable qualitative criteria will result in poor consistency in the efficacy evaluation. During the evaluation of the TCM curative effect, we did not consider the pulse and tongue function. It should also be noted that the proposed scale is only for a general clinical evaluation of ALS; it may not be appropriate for the assessment of all syndrome types.

In conclusion, the proposed ALS-SSIT scale appears to be more suitable for evaluating ALS treated with TCM than other ALS evaluation scales currently used. We are striving to improve the scale and also hope to develop TCM scales for the evaluation of Parkinson disease, Alzheimer disease, and other neurodegenerative diseases.

Data Availability

If required, original materials can be requested by email from the corresponding authors and will be emailed to applicants requesting original materials within one week.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest with regard to the publication of this article.
Authors’ Contributions

Xuanlu Zheng and Joana Schröder contributed equally to this work.

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