Management of cryptococcal meningitis in resource-limited settings: A systematic review

Derek Sloan, Sipho Dlamini, Martin Dedicoat

To the Editor: Cryptococcal meningitis (CM) remains a serious cause of mortality and morbidity in individuals infected with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). The optimal treatment of CM is unknown. We conducted a systematic review to determine the best treatment for CM with an emphasis on resource-poor settings. Six studies met the inclusion criteria; none was found that compared amphotericin B with fluconazole. From the available evidence, it is not possible to determine which treatment is superior for CM.

Background

Despite the increasingly wide availability of antiretroviral therapy (ART), CM remains a significant cause of mortality and morbidity among HIV-infected individuals; untreated, its outcome is universally fatal.1 In South Africa, despite the availability in the public sector of antifungal therapy (fluconazole (FLU) and amphotericin B (AmB)) for treating CM, inpatient mortality is around 25%.2 The ideal management of CM remains unclear. Many patients with HIV infection who present for the first time to health services with a major opportunistic infection such as CM are unaware of their status. We aimed to assess the evidence for which antifungal regimen and other management to use, emphasising resource-poor settings, for treating CM in HIV-infected individuals to enable them to survive and benefit from ART.

Methods

Relevant studies were identified using the Cochrane HIV/AIDS group search strategy from databases from January 1980 to June 2008. Key search words included meningitis, Cryptococcus neoformans, treatment, trial, human immunodeficiency virus, acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, antifungal agents, AmB, flucytosine (FLC), FLU, azole, lumbar puncture, cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) pressure and acetazolamide. Trials deemed suitable were randomised trials of HIV-infected adults with a first episode of CM diagnosed on CSF examination, by India ink staining, CSF culture or cryptococcal antigen testing. The authors extracted data using standardised forms and performed analysis using Rev Man 4.2.7 software.

Results

Six studies are included in the review;3–5 5 compared antifungal treatments.4–8 One study that addressed lowering intracranial pressure using oral acetazolamide to lower intracranial pressures was stopped early because of excessive metabolic acidosis3 (Table I). No study demonstrated differences in survival between groups.

Conclusions

We aimed to determine the best treatment for CM in resource-limited settings in which only AmB and FLU were usually available. No suitable studies comparing these two drugs were found; therefore, we cannot recommend either treatment as superior to the other. Although AmB-containing regimens have caused more rapid sterilisation of CSF compared with FLU,4 we found no evidence of improved survival. The optimal dosing and duration of AmB remains unclear; the Southern African HIV Clinicians Society recommended dose is 1 mg/kg daily for 14 days, followed by FLU 400 mg daily for 8 weeks, then FLU 200 mg daily for life; if AmB is not available or its use is contraindicated, then FLU should be used as first-line treatment.10 Liposomal AmB is associated with less adverse events than AmB and may be useful in selected patients where resources allow.

FLC (not available in South Africa) in combination with AmB leads to faster and increased sterilisation of CSF compared with using AmB alone. This finding does not correlate with improved clinical outcomes. Infectious Diseases Society of America guidelines recommend that AmB be given in combination with FLC.11

Future research into the management of CM in resource-limited settings should focus on the most effective use of medications available in these settings as well as other management modalities such as control of intracranial pressure. The other major issue is the optimal timing of initiation of ART either during or after initial treatment of CM, with the aim of maximising early immunological benefit and reducing the incidence of immune reconstitution-related complications.
Table I. Summary of included studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interventions</th>
<th>Study (reference)</th>
<th>Results</th>
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<tr>
<td>Acetzolamide v. placebo</td>
<td>Newton et al.</td>
<td>Study terminated early owing to excess deaths: 2/12 v. 0/10 relative risk (RR) 4.23 95% confidence interval (95% CI) 0.23 - 79.1 and FLU v. excess acidosis 5/12 v. 0/10 RR 9.31 95% CI 0.38 - 150.25 in the intervention group.</td>
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<tr>
<td>FLU v. FLU and FLC</td>
<td>Mayanja-Kizza et al.</td>
<td>The dose of FLU used (200 mg daily) was lower than the currently recommended 400 mg daily. FLC was given at a dose of 150 mg/kg daily. There was no difference in death rate at 2 weeks: 4/25 v. 10/25 RR 0.4 95% CI 0.14 - 1.11 or at 6 months: 17/25 v. 22/25 RR 0.77 95% CI 0.57 - 1.05; there was no difference in number of patients with sterile CSF at 2 months after treatment: 4/8 v. 12/15 RR 0.4 95% CI 0.11 - 1.36. No major adverse events occurred in either group.</td>
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<td>AmB v. AmB and FLC</td>
<td>Brouwer et al.</td>
<td>AmB 0.7 mg/kg daily was compared with AmB 0.7 mg/kg/day with FLC 100 mg/kg/day. The studies were analysed together for the outcomes of death at 14 days and sterility of CSF culture at 14 days. There was no difference in the proportion of deaths at 14 days: 12/195 v. 12/217 RR 1.1 95% CI 0.51 - 2.4, but there was higher proportion of patients with sterile CSF cultures at 14 days in the group of patients receiving FLC: 93/195 v. 128/217 RR 0.81 95% CI 0.68 - 0.98. There was no difference in major adverse events between the two treatment arms: 5/195 v. 6/217 RR 0.94 95% CI 0.29 - 3.03. Brouwer et al. recorded deaths at 10 weeks; there was no difference between the two groups: 3/16 v. 1/16 RR 2.81 95% CI 0.33 - 24.16. Van der Horst et al. found no difference in symptomatic improvement at 14 days between the two groups: 149/179 v. 157/202 RR 1.07 95% CI 0.97 - 1.18.</td>
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<td>AmB v. AmB and FLU</td>
<td>Brouwer et al.</td>
<td>AmB was compared with AmB, FLC and FLU. AmB 0.7 mg/kg daily was given, FLC 100 mg/kg daily and FLU 400 mg daily. There was no significant difference in the proportion of patients dying at 2 or 10 weeks: 2/16 v. 1/16 RR 2.0 95% CI 0.2 - 19.91 and 3/16 v. 3/16 RR 1.0 95% CI 0.24 - 4.23. There was no difference in the proportion of patients with sterile CSF at 14 days: 2/16 v. 4/16 RR 0.5 95% CI 0.11 - 2.35. Neither group had serious adverse events.</td>
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<td>AmB and FLC v. AmB, FLC and FLU</td>
<td>Brouwer et al.</td>
<td>AmB and FLC were compared with AmB, FLC and FLU. There was no difference in death at 14 days or 10 weeks between the groups: 1/15 v. 1/16 RR 1.07 95% CI 0.07 - 15.57 and 1/15 v. 3/16 RR 1.07 95% CI 0.07 - 15.57. There was no difference in the proportion of patients with sterile CSF at 14 days: 6/15 v. 4/16 RR 1.6 95% CI 0.56 - 4.58. There were no serious adverse events in either group.</td>
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<tr>
<td>AmB v. AmB and FLU</td>
<td>Brouwer et al.</td>
<td>AmB was compared with AmB and FLU. There was no difference in the proportion of deaths at 14 days or 10 weeks: 1/15 v. 5/16 RR 0.21 95% CI 0.03 - 1.62 and 1/15 v. 7/16 RR 0.15 95% CI 0.02 - 1.1. There was no difference in the amount of patients with sterile CSF at 14 days: 6/15 v. 3/16 RR 2.13 95% CI 0.65 - 7.04. There were no serious adverse events in either group.</td>
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<td>AmB v. FLU v. AmB, FLC and FLU</td>
<td>Brouwer et al.</td>
<td>AmB was compared with AmB and FLU. There was no difference in the proportion of deaths at 14 days or 10 weeks: 2/16 v. 5/16 RR 0.4 95% CI 0.09 - 1.77 and 3/16 v. 7/16 RR 0.43 95% CI 0.13 - 1.37. Also, there was no difference in the number of patients with sterile CSF at 14 days: 2/16 v. 3/16 RR 0.67 95% CI 0.13 - 3.47. There were no serious adverse events in either group.</td>
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<td>AmB and FLU v. AmB, FLC and FLU</td>
<td>Brouwer et al.</td>
<td>AmB and FLU were compared with AmB, FLC and FLU. There was no difference in the proportion of deaths at 14 days or 10 weeks: 5/16 v. 7/16 RR 0.5 95% CI 0.66 - 38.15 and 7/16 v. 3/16 RR 2.33 95% CI 0.73 - 7.45. Also, there was no difference in the number of patients with sterile CSF at 14 days: 3/16 v. 4/16 RR 0.75 95% CI 0.2 - 2.83. There were no serious adverse events in either group.</td>
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A full version of this review is available in the Cochrane database.12

References
2. Schaars CJ, Meintjes GA, Morroni C, Post FA, Maartens G. Outcome of AIDS-associated cryptococcal meningitis initially treated with 200 mg/day or 400 mg/day of fluconazole. BMJ Infect Dis 2006; 6: 118.

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