Early prediction of blonanserin response in Japanese patients with schizophrenia

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Background: Blonanserin is a second-generation antipsychotic used for the treatment of schizophrenia in Japan and Korea. The present study aimed to examine early prediction of blonanserin in patients with schizophrenia.

Methods: An 8-week, prospective, single-arm, flexible-dose clinical trial of blonanserin in patients with schizophrenia was conducted under real-world conditions. The inclusion criteria were antipsychotic naïve, and first-episode schizophrenia patients or schizophrenia patients with no consumption of any antipsychotic medication for more than 4 weeks before enrollment in this study. The positive predictive value, negative predictive value, sensitivity, specificity, and predictive power were calculated for the response status at week 4 to predict the subsequent response at week 8.

Results: Thirty-seven patients were recruited (56.8% of them had first-episode schizophrenia), and 28 (75.7%) completed the trial. At week 8, blonanserin was associated with a significant improvement in the Positive and Negative Syndrome Scale (PANSS) total score (P<0.0001) and in positive (P<0.0001), negative (P<0.0001), and general subscale scores (P<0.0001). In terms of percentage improvement of PANSS total scores from baseline to week 8, 64.9% of patients showed a ≥20% reduction in the PANSS total score and 48.6% showed a ≥30% reduction. However, 8.1% of patients experienced at least one adverse event. Using the 20% reduction in the PANSS total score at week 4 as a definition of an early response, the negative predictive values for later responses (ie, reductions of ≥30 and ≥40 in the PANSS total scores) were 88.9% and 94.1%, respectively. The specificities were 80.0% and 51.6%, respectively.

Conclusion: Our results suggest that the blonanserin response at week 4 could predict the later response at week 8.

Keywords: efficacy, safety, antipsychotic

Introduction

Blonanserin was approved in Japan in January 2008 and in Korea in August 2009 for the treatment of schizophrenia (in the People’s Republic of China, a Phase III clinical trial has been completed, NCT01516424). Blonanserin is classified as a second-generation antipsychotic (SGA). It has antagonistic activity toward serotonin 2A receptor (Kᵢ=0.812 nM), dopamine D₂ receptor (Kᵢ=0.142 nM), and dopamine D₃ receptor (Kᵢ=0.494 nM) as well as a weak antagonistic activity toward dopamine D₁ receptor (Kᵢ=1.070 nM) and adrenergic α₁ receptor (Kᵢ=26.7 nM). However, it is almost completely devoid of histamine H₁ (Kᵢ>100 nM) and muscarinic M₁, antagonistic activity (Kᵢ>100 nM).¹ Blonanserin has a unique pharmacological receptor profile, with higher dopamine D₃ receptor occupancy than other SGAs and lower antagonistic activity toward serotonin 2A receptor than other SGAs.² Our meta-analysis revealed that blonanserin is superior to haloperidol in the improvement of the negative subscale score of the Positive and Negative Syndrome Scale (PANSS).³,4 In addition, blonanserin carries a lower risk of hyperprolactinemia.
and weight gain than risperidone.\textsuperscript{4,5} This evidence suggests that blonanserin can be used for the treatment of schizophrenia as a first-line antipsychotic such as aripiprazole.

A recent aripiprazole study involving first-episode psychosis revealed that the response at week 3 of aripiprazole treatment accurately predicts the later response (at week 6).\textsuperscript{6} Nonetheless, no reports have described early prediction of a blonanserin response in patients with schizophrenia. In the present clinical trial, we enrolled patients with first-episode schizophrenia and patients with schizophrenia who did not take any antipsychotic medication for more than 4 weeks before enrollment in this study. Patients with first-episode antipsychotic naïve, schizophrenia are reported to be more sensitive to the adverse effects of antipsychotics than other groups of patients.\textsuperscript{7,8} In addition, several studies\textsuperscript{9,10} have suggested that patients with first-episode schizophrenia respond to low doses of antipsychotic medication.\textsuperscript{11} Because the blonanserin dose was slowly increased during the present clinical trial, the time point for early prediction of the blonanserin response was set to week 4. Thus, an 8-week, prospective, single-arm, flexible-dose clinical trial of blonanserin in patients with schizophrenia was conducted in real-world clinical settings. We tested whether improvement after the first 4 weeks of treatment can predict the response after 8 weeks.

**Materials and methods**

**Subjects**

The present study was conducted from July 2009 to January 2014 at the Fujita Health University Hospital and the Okehazama Hospital. The patients were diagnosed according to the Diagnostic and DSM-IV (Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition) criteria with a consensus of at least two experienced psychiatrists on the basis of unstructured interviews and a review of all medical records. All subjects met the following inclusion criteria: 1) patients with first-episode schizophrenia and patients with schizophrenia who did not take any antipsychotic medication for more than 4 weeks before enrollment in this study; 2) age 20–70 years; 3) no neurological or systemic disease, including disturbance of hematopoiesis; 4) no history of electroconvulsive therapy within 6 months prior to the study enrollment; 5) absence of pregnancy; and 6) no dependence on any addictive substances other than nicotine in the past 5 years before enrollment. All subjects underwent laboratory blood testing and electrocardiography at the time of enrollment, and no patients were excluded from the study because of a medical problem.

The clinical trial was described in detail to the subjects, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants and their guardians. This study was approved by the Ethics Committees of Fujita Health University and Okehazama Hospital.

**Procedures**

Because several studies\textsuperscript{9,10} have suggested that patients with first-episode schizophrenia respond to low doses of an antipsychotic,\textsuperscript{11} all patients received the dose of blonanserin in the range of 4–24 mg/day. The dose of blonanserin was slowly increased (initial dose, 4 mg/day) as a rule unless severe side effects occurred (in such cases, it was slowly decreased). The blonanserin dosage was adjusted at the discretion of a treating psychiatrist. Lorazepam, brotizolam, and biperiden were allowed during our clinical trial (by prescription and for valid clinical reasons).

**Evaluation of psychopathology, tolerability, and safety**

Patients were tested for psychotic symptoms using PANSS\textsuperscript{3} at baseline and then again after 4 and 8 weeks. All participants were monitored for adverse events every week by means of full physical examination and general questioning about adverse effects, and the responses were then recorded. All participants underwent blood tests for a complete blood count at week 8 and for liver function, kidney function, electrolytes, prolactin, triglycerides, total cholesterol, and fasting glucose at baseline and at weeks 4 and 8 of the trial.

**Statistical analysis**

The changes in the PANSS total and subscale scores from baseline to endpoint were evaluated. In addition, the percentage of improvement in the PANSS total score from baseline to week 8 was analyzed (clinical response was defined with increasing stringency, ie, at least 10%, 20%, 30%, or 40% reduction in the PANSS total score) as previous studies.\textsuperscript{12–15} Intent-to-treat analysis was performed using the last observation carried forward (LOCF) method. Subjects who had at least two data points (from the measurements) were entered into study analyses. Each participant’s last observation was taken as the endpoint. Paired Student’s t-test was used to assess statistical significance of the change in psychopathology scores or in laboratory test values from baseline to endpoint. Moreover, the positive predictive value, negative predictive value (NPV), sensitivity, specificity, and predictive power were calculated for the response status at week 4 to predict the subsequent response at week 8.\textsuperscript{12–15} Response
criteria with high NPV and high specificity are particularly useful because clinicians have to quickly change the course of a treatment if the treatment is unlikely to be effective.\textsuperscript{12-15}

To determine associations between symptom reductions and the response status, we used chi-square tests. A change in the PANSS total score at week 4 was also examined, as was a change in the PANSS total score at week 8, using regression analysis. All calculations were performed via JMP software (JMP 5.2. 1J, SAS Japan Inc., Tokyo, Japan), and a $P$-value of $<0.05$ was assumed to denote statistical significance.

**Results**

Demographics and other characteristics of the patients are presented in Table 1. Thirty-seven patients (56.8\% of them had a diagnosis of a first-episode schizophrenia) were eventually recruited, and 28 (75.7\%) completed the trial. Nine patients (24.3\%) discontinued the study medication at week 4 because of lack of efficacy, adverse effects, or withdrawn consent (Figure 1).

At week 8, blonanserin was associated with a significant improvement in the PANSS total score ($P<0.0001$) and in positive ($P<0.0001$), negative ($P<0.0001$), and general subscale scores ($P<0.0001$) (Table 2). A total of 64.9\% of the patients showed a $\geq 20\%$ reduction in the PANSS total score, and 48.6\% of the patients showed a $\geq 30\%$ reduction (Figure 2). There were no significant differences in demographic characteristics of the participants between responders and nonresponders (Table 1). Considering a $20\%$ reduction in the PANSS total score at week 4 as a definition of an early response, NPVs for later responses (ie, reductions of $\geq 30\%$ and $\geq 40\%$ in the PANSS total scores) were 88.9\% and 94.1\%, respectively (Table 3). The specificities were 80.0\% and 51.6\%, respectively (Table 3). A change in the PANSS total score at week 4 was also associated with that at week 8 in regression analysis ($P<0.0001$, $\beta=0.833$).

Three patients (8.1\%) experienced extrapyramidal side effects and akathisia. Two of the three patients discontinued their participation in the study because of the extrapyramidal side effects. No patients had other adverse effects such as weight change, QTc prolongation (on an electrocardiogram), or aberrations in blood tests. Blonanserin nonresponders were more likely to use antiparkinsonian drugs than responders (Table 1).

**Discussion**

The present study is the first clinical trial examining early prediction of a blonanserin response in patients with...
Table 2 Changes from baseline to week 4 and to week 8 in the PANSS total scores and PANSS subscores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Baseline (n=37)</th>
<th>Mean change at week 4 (n=37)*</th>
<th>Mean change at week 8 (n=37)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean (±SD)</td>
<td>Mean change (±SD) P-value</td>
<td>Mean change (±SD) P-value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PANSS total scores</td>
<td>111.1 (21.1)</td>
<td>-25.6 (18.0) P-value &lt;0.0001</td>
<td>-27.9 (18.2) P-value &lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PANSS positive subscores</td>
<td>28.6 (7.65)</td>
<td>-8.38 (7.01) P-value &lt;0.0001</td>
<td>-10.4 (7.22) P-value &lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PANSS negative subscores</td>
<td>26.5 (6.69)</td>
<td>-5.81 (5.36) P-value &lt;0.0001</td>
<td>-5.84 (5.93) P-value &lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PANSS general subscores</td>
<td>56.9 (10.7)</td>
<td>-13.3 (8.03) P-value &lt;0.0001</td>
<td>-14.4 (8.54) P-value &lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: *Number of LOCF = 0; **Number of LOCF = 9 (24.3%).
Abbreviations: LOCF, last observation carried forward; PANSS, Positive and Negative Syndrome Scale; SD, standard deviation.
control arm of a placebo or active treatment, the trial was not randomized, and the patients and physicians were not blinded to the group assignment of patients. Because of the lack of a control group, the efficacy and tolerability of blonanserin observed in this study cannot be compared with those of other antipsychotic drugs in this population of patients. The Phase III clinical trials of blonanserin\textsuperscript{16–19} did not use the definition of a drug response using PANSS; therefore, we could not compare our results with those of similar studies. Nonetheless, our present study suggests that blonanserin significantly improves psychopathological symptoms. Although the duration of study was short (8 weeks), first-episode schizophrenia patients may often respond slower than multiple-episode patients. Moreover, the current study was not the fixed-dose of blonanserin, and the patients in the study were not tested for psychotic symptoms using PANSS at 1, 2, and 3 weeks as in the previous studies.\textsuperscript{12–15} Therefore, early prediction of blonanserin response observed in this study cannot be directly compared with other antipsychotic drugs in this population of patients in other studies.\textsuperscript{12–15} Finally, it may not be trivial that intent-to-treat analysis was performed using LOCF method in the study. This method may give a biased estimate of the treatment effect and underestimate the variability of the estimated result.\textsuperscript{20} It is not clearly justified why this analysis in particular is appropriate and valid.

In conclusion, our findings suggest that blonanserin is effective and well tolerated in patients with first-episode schizophrenia and patients with schizophrenia who did not take any antipsychotic medication for more than 4 weeks before enrollment in this study in Japan. Our results suggest that the response at week 4 of blonanserin predicts the later response (at week 8). Because of the small sample size and the lack of a comparator, a double-blind randomized controlled trial should be conducted to further validate the use of blonanserin for the treatment of schizophrenia.

**Acknowledgments**

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**Disclosure**

Dr Kishi has received speaker’s honoraria from Abbott, Astellas, Daiichi Sankyo, Dainippon Sumitomo, Eli Lilly, GlaxoSmithKline, Yoshitomi, Otsuka, Meiji, Shionogi, Janssen, Novartis, Tanabe-Mitsubishi and Pfizer. Dr Matsuda has received speaker’s honoraria from Dainippon Sumitomo, Eli Lilly, Otsuka, and Pfizer. Dr Fujita has received speaker’s honoraria from Eli Lilly, Mochida, GlaxoSmithKline, Astellas, Daiichi Sankyo, Dainippon Sumitomo, Eli Lilly, Otsuka, Meiji, Shionogi, Janssen, Novartis, Tanabe-Mitsubishi and Pfizer. Dr Hayakawa, and Ms A Adachi for the technical support.

**Table 3** Conditional probabilities that the response at week 4 will predict the response at week 8 using thresholds for an early response of $\geq 10\%$, $\geq 20\%$, and $\geq 30\%$ improvement in the PANSS total scores and thresholds for later responses of $\geq 20\%$, $\geq 30\%$, and $\geq 40\%$ improvement in the PANSS total score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Improvement at week 4\textsuperscript{a}</th>
<th>$\geq 10%$ reduction in PANSS total scores</th>
<th>$\geq 20%$ reduction in PANSS total scores</th>
<th>$\geq 30%$ reduction in PANSS total scores</th>
<th>$\geq 40%$ reduction in PANSS total scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Response criteria at week 8\textsuperscript{b}</td>
<td>$\geq 20%$</td>
<td>$\geq 30%$</td>
<td>$\geq 40%$</td>
<td>$\geq 30%$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$p$-value ($\chi^2$) \textsuperscript{c}</td>
<td>0.0019 (9.64)</td>
<td>0.001 (10.9)</td>
<td>0.0957 (2.78)</td>
<td>0.00001 (18.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive predictive value, %</td>
<td>76.7</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>80.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative predictive value, %</td>
<td>85.7</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>88.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity, %</td>
<td>95.8</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>88.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specificity, %</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>80.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predictive power, %</td>
<td>78.4</td>
<td>67.6</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>83.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textbf{Notes:} $^a$Improvements at week 4 are expressed as percentage improvement over the baseline PANSS total scores. $^b$Response criteria at week 8 are expressed as percentage improvement over the baseline PANSS total scores. $^c$\textit{p}-value, $\chi^2$ test, df=1.

\textbf{Abbreviation:} PANSS, Positive and Negative Syndrome Scale.
Janssen, Yoshitomi, and Otsuka. Dr Iwata has received speaker’s honoraria from Astellas, Dainippon Sumitomo, Eli Lilly, GlaxoSmithKline, Janssen, Yoshitomi, Otsuka, Meiji, Shionogi, Novartis, and Pfizer.

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