Differential clinical effects of fluvoxamine by the effect of age in Japanese female major depressive patients

Hisashi Higuchi1
Kazuhiro Sato2
Shingo Naito3
Keizo Yoshida4
Hitoshi Takahashi5
Mitsuhiro Kamata6
Noboru Yamaguchi1

1Department of Neuropsychiatry, St Marianna University School of Medicine, 2-16-1 Sugou, Miyamae-ku, Kawasaki City, Kanagawa 216-8511, Japan; 2Department of Psychiatry, Akita Kaiseikai Hospital, 1-7-5 Ushijima-nishi, Akita City, Akita 010-0063, Japan; 3Department of Neuropsychiatry, Akita City Hospital, 4-30 Kawamotomatsuoka-machi, Akita City, Akita 010-0933, Japan; 4Department of Psychiatry, Nagoya University Graduate School of Medicine, 65 Tsurumai-cho, Showa-ku, Nagoya City, Aichi 466-8550, Japan; 5Department of Psychiatry, Tokyo Women’s Medical University School of Medicine, Kawada-cho, Shinjyuku-ku, Tokyo, 162-8666, Japan; 6Health Administration Center, Yamagata University 1-4-12, Kojirakawa, Yamagata City, 990-8560, Japan

Abstract: The effects of gender differences and age on the treatment response to fluvoxamine were investigated in major depressive Japanese patients. A total of 100 Japanese patients participated in this study. The daily dose of fluvoxamine was fixed to 100, 150 or 200 mg in the fourth week. This fixed dose was maintained until the end of the 6-week study. The patients were divided into 3 groups: younger females, older females, and males. Depressive symptoms were evaluated using the Montgomery and Åsberg Depression Rating Scale (MADRS) at pretreatment and at 1, 2, 4, and 6 weeks after the commencement of the study. Seven of the 100 patients were excluded, and the remaining 93 patients constituted the subjects (50 females, 43 males). The number of intent-to-treat responders and non-responders was 55 and 38, respectively. There was a significant difference in the changes in the time course of the MADRS score and changes in the MADRS scores at each evaluation point between the younger and older females. Younger females demonstrated a significantly better response than older females. The results suggest that fluvoxamine is more effective in younger female patients than in older female patients.

Keywords: major depressive disorder, fluvoxamine, antidepressant response, menopausal status

Introduction

Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are the most widely used drugs for the treatment of depression because their efficacy is similar to that of tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs); further, they have an advantage over TCAs for tolerability.1 Despite differences in structure and activity, SSRIs, including fluvoxamine, share several common features, and there is no evidence for the superior efficacy of one agent over another. In a review of double-blind comparative studies of fluvoxamine vs imipramine for treating major depressive patients, no difference was indicated in 12 trials, while fluvoxamine was found to be the superior antidepressant in 2 trials.2

Depression occurs more often in women than in men, and differences are also observed between men and women in terms of the clinical features of depression and response to treatments.3 Kornstein et al4 suggested that women had an advantage in terms of the response rate to sertraline, while men had a higher response rate to imipramine. In this study, the responder analysis at the end point by menopausal status demonstrated that premenopausal women were significantly more likely to respond to sertraline than imipramine, whereas the response rates to sertraline and imipramine of postmenopausal women were similar. However, Hildebrandt et al5 demonstrated similar clinical effects with antidepressant (clomipramine vs citalopram, paroxetine, and moclobemide) treatment for male and female patients with major and predominantly melancholic depression. There was also no gender difference in treatment response to sertraline in 6-month treatment of depression.6

In Japanese depressive patients, there was no significant difference in treatment response to fluvoxamine and paroxetine between males and females;7 however, we...
recently revealed that fluvoxamine was more effective in younger female patients than in older female and male patients
in a preliminary report dealing with 66 patients. A major
limitation of this study was the small number of patients,
particularly the number of younger females. Therefore, we
recruited new patients in order to increase the total number of
patients to 100. In the present study, we re-analyzed the effects
of gender differences and age on the treatment response to
fluvoxamine in 100 major depressive patients.

Method

Subjects
This study included a total of 100 Japanese patients who
fulfilled the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental
Disorders (DSM)-IV criteria for the diagnosis of a major
depressive disorder and whose Montgomery and Asberg
Depression Rating Scale (MADRS) scores at pretreat-
ment were 21 or higher. Patients suffering from other axis I
 disorders (such as dementia, substance abuse, dysthymia,
 panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and gener-
alized anxiety disorder) and those with axis II disorders as
determined by a clinical interview were excluded from the
study. Patients with a past history of childhood disorders, and
those with severe non-psychiatric medical disorders were also
excluded. The subjects were patients aged between 20 and
69 years who had not used any psychotropic drug for at least
14 days before participating in the study. Informed consent
was obtained from the subjects after providing them with a
complete description of the study. Our study was performed
in psychiatric units of general hospitals. Well trained psychia-
trists made diagnoses and provided antidepressant treatment
for the patients.

Treatment
The same dose of fluvoxamine was administered twice
daily, after dinner and at bedtime, for 6 weeks. The initial
daily dose was 50 mg, which was increased to 100 mg after
1 week. After another week, the dose was set to 100, 150, or
200 mg, depending on the clinical judgment of the treating
psychiatrists; this fixed dose was maintained until the end
of the study. Patients with insomnia were prescribed 0.25 or
0.5 mg of brotizolam, a benzodiazepine sedative hypnotic,
at bedtime. No other psychotropic drugs were permitted
during the study.

Data collection
The patients were divided into 3 groups: females aged <44
years, females aged ≥44 years, and males. For the female
patients, we set the cut-off point at 44 years of age because
females aged <44 years have a high potential for the intact
gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH) pulse pattern and
functioning ovulation cycle. The normal pattern of pulsatile
GnRH secretion changes during the early 40s as a conse-
quence of irregularity in hypothalamic pacemaker function;
therefore, both phases of the ovarian cycle are affected during
the perimenopausal period. Several endocrine changes
precede clinical menopause, such as changes in the pattern
of pulsatile GnRH secretion; therefore, we used 44 years
as the cut-off point to distinguish the fertile period from the
peri-/postmenopausal periods. The severity of the depressive
symptoms was assessed using MADRS. Assessments were
conducted at the baseline and at 1, 2, 4, and 6 weeks after
the initiation of fluvoxamine treatment. A single person rated
each patient. A decrease of 50% or higher in the baseline
MADRS score was defined as a clinical response.

Statistical analysis
We used an intent-to-treat last-observation-carried-forward
analysis. The clinical characteristics of the patients, responders,
and non-responders were analyzed by a chi-square test or an
unpaired t-test where appropriate. The distribution of respond-
ers and non-responders in the 3 groups was analyzed by a
chi-square test. The changes in the time course of MADRS
scores (the mean score at each evaluation point minus the mean
score at the baseline) among females aged <44 years, females
aged ≥44 years, and males were analyzed by a repeated-
measures analysis of variance (ANOVA). The changes in
MADRS scores at 1, 2, 4, and 6 weeks among the 3 groups
were analyzed by an unpaired t test. Statistical analysis was
performed using StatView version 5.0 (SAS Institute INC.,
Cary, NC). All the tests were two-tailed, and a p value ≤ 0.05
was regarded as significant.

Results
Among the 100 patients, 3 stopped visiting our hospitals
after the first visit without providing an explanation. We
excluded 4 patients from the current analysis because of poor
compliance with pharmacotherapy. Therefore, the remaining
93 patients constituted the subjects, who included 50 females
and 43 males (mean age ± SD = 48.8 ± 13.7 years). The final
daily dose of fluvoxamine was 50 mg for 7, 100 mg for 15,
150 mg for 8, and 200 mg for 64 patients. Patient character-
istics are shown in Table 1.

The number of intent-to-treat responders and non-
responders was 55 and 38 patients, respectively. No sig-
nificant difference was observed in average age, number
of previous depressive episodes, proportion of melancholia and non-melancholia, and severity in MADRS scores at pretreatment between the responders and non-responders (Table 1). Table 2 shows the distributions and intent-to-treat response rates to fluvoxamine between responders and non-responders. Although the response rate of the females of age group <44 years was high (75%), there was no significant difference in the distributions of the responders and non-responders between females aged <44 years and those aged ≥44 years (χ² = 2.79, p = 0.09), females aged <44 years and males (χ² = 1.08, p = 0.30), and females aged ≥44 years and males (χ² = 0.84, p = 0.36).

There was a significant difference in the changes in the time course of the MADRS score between the females aged <44 years and those aged ≥44 years (F = 2.97, p = 0.02). However, there was no significant difference between females aged <44 years and males (F = 1.50, p = 0.20), and females aged ≥44 years and males at 6 weeks (F = 0.96, p = 0.43) (Figure 1). Figure 2 depicts changes in the MADRS scores in the 3 groups. There was a significant difference in the MADRS score at each evaluation point between females aged <44 years and those aged ≥44 years (1 week: t = -3.345, p = 0.001; 2 weeks: t = -2.71, p = 0.009; 4 weeks: t = -2.11, p = 0.04; and 6 weeks: t = -2.17, p = 0.04). Although a significant difference was observed between females aged ≥44 years and males for the MADRS score at each evaluation point (1 week: t = -0.70, p = 0.49; 2 weeks: t = -0.47, p = 0.64; 4 weeks: t = -0.48, p = 0.63; and 6 weeks: t = -0.68, p = 0.50).

### Discussion

The results of this study reveal that the fluvoxamine treatment significantly improved the changes in the time course of MADRS score and changes in the MADRS scores at each evaluation point in younger female depressive patients (females aged <44 years) compared with older female patients (females aged ≥44 years). Our results were in agreement with those of a recent study in which the menopause status negatively affected the SSRI treatment response of Caucasian female depressive patients treated in primary care. Kornstein et al. hypothesized a mechanism for the effect of gender differences; the female gonadal hormones, particularly estrogen, may play an important role in antidepressant activity, thereby enhancing the response to SSRIs in younger women. Halbreich et al. have shown that estrogen enhances monoaminergic activity and augments serotoninergic postsynaptic responsiveness. Several studies have suggested that estrogen augments the response to SSRIs in female postmenopausal major depressive patients. Therefore, we suggested that the augmentation therapy using estrogen was useful for postmenopausal patients who did not response to SSRIs. On the other hand, sex differences in depressive response during monoamine depletions in remitted depressive patients were recently reported. In the study, women experienced greater depressive responses than men during tryptophan depletion inducing hyposerotonergic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total (N = 93)</th>
<th>Responders (N = 55)</th>
<th>Non-responders (N = 38)</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex (male/female)</td>
<td>43/50</td>
<td>26/29</td>
<td>17/21</td>
<td>χ² = 0.58</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age (year)</td>
<td>48.8 ± 13.7</td>
<td>48.0 ± 13.6</td>
<td>50.0 ± 13.8</td>
<td>t = -0.69</td>
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<td>Number of previous episodes</td>
<td>0.43 ± 0.97</td>
<td>0.42 ± 1.13</td>
<td>0.45 ± 0.69</td>
<td>t = -0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melancholia (yes/no)</td>
<td>36/57</td>
<td>19/36</td>
<td>17/21</td>
<td>χ² = 0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretreatment total MADRS score</td>
<td>29.8 ± 5.2</td>
<td>29.5 ± 5.09</td>
<td>29.9 ± 5.33</td>
<td>χ² = 0.062</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aData are expressed as mean ± SD

*bAnalysis performed with the use of a chi-square test between the responders and non-responders.

Table 2 Distribution of the responders and non-responders among females <44 years of age, females ≥44 years of age and males

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total (N = 93)</th>
<th>Female &lt;44 (N = 16)</th>
<th>Female ≥44 (N = 34)</th>
<th>Male (N = 44)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responder</td>
<td>55 (59.1%)</td>
<td>12 (75.0%)</td>
<td>17 (50.0%)</td>
<td>26 (60.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-responder</td>
<td>38 (40.9%)</td>
<td>4 (25.0%)</td>
<td>17 (50.0%)</td>
<td>17 (39.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Male (N = 43)

Female ≥44 (N = 34)

Female <44 (N = 16)

Figure 1 Changes in the time course of the MADRS scores in females aged <44 years, females aged ≥44 years, and males treated with fluvoxamine. Each point represents the mean score ± SD. Analysis was performed using a repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA).

*p < 0.05.

Abbreviation: MADRS, Montgomery and Åsberg Depression Rating Scale.

Figure 2 Changes in the MADRS scores in females aged <44 years, females aged ≥44 years, and males treated with fluvoxamine at each evaluation point. Analysis was performed using an unpaired t test.

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01.

Abbreviation: MADRS, Montgomery and Åsberg Depression Rating Scale.
function, but not during catecholamine depletion.17 Similar results were obtained in another recent study on healthy people.18 These findings suggest that differential sex effects in serotonergic function may be related to gender differences in the clinical effects of SSRIs.

In conclusion, the present study suggests that fluvoxamine is more effective in younger female patients than in older female and male patients. The major limitation of this study is the lack of placebo control patients. A second limitation is the relatively small number of younger females. This limitation leads to the possibility of a false negative in the distributions of the responders and non-responders between younger females and older females.

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Disclosure
The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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