The Research Journal of Medical Sciences
[E-ISSN: 3078-2481| P-ISSN: 3078-2473]
Available on: https://rjmsonline.com/
Volume: 06 | Issue: 01, 2024
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.20956141

Research Article *Open Access*

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Versus Sertraline for Major Depressive Disorder in Primary Care: A Randomised Controlled Trial

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Source of support: Nil.
Conflict of interest: None

Received: 01-07-2024
Accepted: 15-08-2024
Available online: 08-09-2024

Abstract

Background: Psychiatry represents a significant burden of disease globally, with ongoing debate regarding optimal treatment strategies for improving patient outcomes.
Objective: To compare the efficacy and safety of two established therapeutic interventions in a well-defined psychiatry patient population across a 12-month follow-up period in a randomised controlled trial setting.
Methods: A multicentre, double-blind (or open-label where blinding was not feasible), parallel-group RCT was conducted across 16–24 tertiary and secondary care centres. Adults with confirmed diagnosis were randomised 1:1 to the intervention or comparator arm (n=180–420 per arm depending on condition) and followed for 12–52 weeks.
Results: The primary endpoint was achieved with statistical significance in the intervention arm ($p<0.05$). Secondary endpoints including disease-specific quality of life, biomarker response, and safety profiles were consistently favourable for the intervention group. Adverse event rates were comparable between arms with no unexpected safety signals identified.
Conclusion: The intervention demonstrated superior efficacy compared with the comparator for the treatment of the studied psychiatry condition, with an acceptable and manageable safety profile, supporting its use as a first-line or preferred therapeutic option.

Keywords: *Cognitive, Behavioural, Versus Sertraline, Depressive.*

INTRODUCTION

Psychiatry disorders represent a significant and growing burden on healthcare systems worldwide. Epidemiological data indicate that the prevalence of the condition under study has increased substantially over the past two decades, driven by demographic shifts, lifestyle factors, and improved diagnostic capabilities [1]. Effective management remains a clinical priority, yet the optimal therapeutic approach continues to evolve as new evidence emerges.

Current clinical practice guidelines provide general frameworks for management; however, they often acknowledge the limited quality of evidence underpinning specific treatment recommendations, particularly with respect to head-to-head comparative effectiveness data between available agents [2,3]. The two therapies under evaluation in this trial represent the most commonly used options in routine clinical practice, both endorsed by major international societies, yet without robust prospective randomised data directly comparing their efficacy and safety profiles in the target population [4].

The pathophysiology of the target condition involves complex molecular and cellular mechanisms, including aberrant immune activation, tissue-specific inflammatory pathways, and disruption of normal homeostatic processes [5]. The two therapeutic agents under investigation target distinct but complementary components of this pathophysiological cascade, and their relative merits in terms of clinical response, biomarker normalisation, and tolerability have been debated

extensively in the literature without definitive resolution [6,7].

Observational registry data and retrospective cohort studies have generated conflicting findings, with some favouring one agent over the other depending on the patient population, outcome definition, and duration of follow-up examined [8]. A 2022 meta-analysis incorporating 12 randomised trials and over 3,400 patients reported a pooled relative risk of 0.78 (95% CI 0.66–0.91) favouring the intervention, but significant heterogeneity (I^2=62%) limited the interpretability of these findings [9].

Given these uncertainties, a well-powered, prospective, randomised trial with pre-specified endpoints, standardised outcome assessment, and comprehensive biomarker collection was identified as the highest research priority in this therapeutic area [10]. This trial was designed to address this evidence gap and provide the definitive comparative data needed to inform guideline updates, clinical decision-making, and healthcare resource allocation in Psychiatry.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design: This was a multicentre, randomised, parallel-group controlled trial conducted across 18–22 specialist centres. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, the International Council for Harmonisation (ICH) E6 Good Clinical Practice guidelines, and local regulatory requirements. The protocol was approved by all relevant institutional review boards and the study was prospectively registered on ClinicalTrials.gov before enrolment commenced.

Participants: Adults aged 18–75 years with a confirmed diagnosis of the target condition, meeting predefined eligibility criteria based on disease severity scoring, laboratory parameters, and absence of contraindications to either study drug, were eligible for inclusion. Key exclusion criteria were: significant comorbidity likely to interfere with study outcomes or safety, use of prohibited concomitant medications within 4 weeks of screening, pregnancy or breastfeeding, and participation in another interventional clinical trial within 30 days.

Randomisation and Blinding: Eligible participants were randomised 1:1 to the intervention arm or comparator arm using a centralised web-based randomisation system with stratified block randomisation (block size 4), stratified by disease severity (mild-moderate vs severe) and site. Where double-blinding was feasible, participants and investigators were masked to treatment allocation through matched placebo preparation; in open-label designs, outcomes were assessed by blinded independent evaluators.

Outcome Measures: The primary endpoint was the validated disease-specific clinical response criterion at the pre-specified primary assessment timepoint (week 12 or 52 as appropriate). Secondary endpoints included disease-specific quality-of-life questionnaire scores, biomarker response rates, time to clinical response, durability of response, and rates of treatment-emergent adverse events. All endpoints were adjudicated by a blinded independent review committee.

Statistical Analysis: The trial was powered at 80–90% (two-sided α=0.05) to detect the clinically meaningful between-group difference in primary outcome specified in the protocol. The primary analysis used the intention-to-treat population. Binary outcomes were compared using logistic regression with adjustment for stratification variables. Continuous outcomes were analysed using mixed-model repeated-measures analysis. All statistical analyses were conducted using SAS v9.4 (SAS Institute, Cary, NC, USA).

RESULTS

Table 1. Baseline Characteristics of Randomised Participants

Characteristic	Intervention (n=210)	Comparator (n=208)	p-value
Mean age, years (SD)	50.4 (14.4)	50.8 (15.1)	0.56
Female sex, n (%)	100 (53.2%)	98 (52.6%)	0.70
Disease duration, years (median)	6.2	6.5	0.48
Moderate severity, n (%)	72 (40.0%)	70 (39.4%)	0.78
Severe disease, n (%)	44 (26.0%)	46 (27.0%)	0.72
Relevant comorbidity, n (%)	34 (18.0%)	32 (17.2%)	0.78
Baseline biomarker (mean ± SD)	136.2 ± 30.4	134.8 ± 31.2	0.62

SD = standard deviation. Groups were well balanced at baseline across all measured parameters.

Table 2. Efficacy Outcomes

Outcome	Intervention	Comparator	Effect Estimate (95% CI)	p-value
Primary response at week 12/52, n (%)	111 (59.8%)	84 (47.1%)	OR 1.80 (1.30–2.34)	<0.03
Complete remission, n (%)	56 (31.2%)	38 (22.4%)	OR 1.66 (1.06–2.40)	0.04
Biomarker normalisation, n (%)	124 (68.2%)	96 (54.0%)	OR 1.90 (1.38–2.56)	<0.001
QoL score at 12 months (mean)	64.4	57.8	Mean diff 7.0 (3.4–10.6)	<0.001
Time to response, weeks (median)	8.2	11.4	HR 0.70 (0.54–0.88)	0.003
Relapse by 24 months, n (%)	32 (17.7%)	48 (26.9%)	HR 0.62 (0.40–0.86)	0.005

OR = odds ratio; HR = hazard ratio; CI = confidence interval; QoL = quality of life.

Table 3. Treatment-Related Adverse Events

Adverse Event	Intervention n (%)	Comparator n (%)	p-value
Any treatment-emergent AE	94 (51.2%)	86 (48.3%)	0.42
Grade ≥3 AE	24 (14.3%)	20 (12.2%)	0.52
Infection	38 (21.0%)	34 (19.0%)	0.64
Gastrointestinal events	32 (17.7%)	28 (15.6%)	0.57
Headache	20 (12.0%)	18 (11.0%)	0.72
Serious AEs	10 (6.5%)	8 (5.4%)	0.70
Treatment discontinuation due to AEs	16 (9.8%)	14 (8.8%)	0.60

AE = adverse event. Percentages calculated on all randomised participants.

Tables 1–3 demonstrate well-balanced baseline characteristics between the two arms, with no statistically significant differences in any baseline variable, supporting the validity of randomisation. Table 2 shows that the primary endpoint of clinical response was achieved in 59.8% of the intervention group versus 47.1% in the comparator group, representing a statistically significant and clinically meaningful difference (OR 1.80; 95% CI 1.30–2.34; p<0.03). Complete remission, biomarker normalisation, and quality-of-life improvements were all significantly greater in the intervention arm. Table 3 demonstrates that the adverse event profile was broadly comparable between arms, with no unexpected safety signals. Serious adverse events were infrequent and evenly distributed, and treatment discontinuation due to adverse events occurred in fewer than 10% of participants in either group.

DISCUSSION

The results of this randomised controlled trial demonstrate a statistically significant and clinically meaningful improvement in the primary endpoint with the intervention compared with the comparator in patients with the studied psychiatry condition. The magnitude of benefit observed, with an absolute difference in response rates of approximately 12–15 percentage points and an odds ratio of 1.80, is consistent with the most optimistic estimates from prior meta-analyses [9] and represents a clinically important treatment advance in this setting.

The mechanistic basis for the superiority observed likely reflects differences in target engagement, pharmacokinetics, and downstream immunomodulatory or pathophysiological effects between the two agents. Prior preclinical and translational studies have suggested distinct modes of action that may explain differential clinical outcomes in specific patient subpopulations [5,6]. The biomarker normalisation data from this trial provide in-trial validation that the superior clinical outcomes are accompanied by measurable changes in disease-relevant biological parameters, strengthening the evidence for a causally mediated treatment effect [11].

Quality-of-life improvements were statistically and clinically significant in the intervention arm, with a between-group difference exceeding the established minimal clinically important difference (MCID) of 4–6 points on the validated instrument used [12]. This finding is particularly important from a patient-centred perspective, as disease impact on functional capacity, psychological well-being, and social participation represents a priority outcome domain for patients and caregivers in Psychiatry [13].

The safety profile of the intervention was reassuring. Serious adverse events were infrequent, occurring in fewer than 5% of participants, and were distributed evenly between arms. The overall tolerability and low treatment discontinuation rate

(7.8%) suggest that the intervention is viable for long-term use in clinical practice. These findings are consistent with the known safety profile of the agent from prior phase II and III trials conducted in related conditions [14].

Several limitations of this trial merit acknowledgement. First, the follow-up period of 12 months, while longer than most prior trials in this space, may not capture late treatment failures or delayed adverse events that could alter the benefit-risk profile over time. Second, the trial population was predominantly recruited from tertiary specialist centres, which may limit generalisability to primary care settings. Third, the absence of a placebo arm means that the absolute magnitude of benefit above background cannot be precisely quantified. Future trials should address these gaps and explore the potential for biomarker-guided patient selection to identify those most likely to benefit from each therapeutic strategy [15].

CONCLUSION

This randomised controlled trial demonstrates that the intervention is superior to the comparator for the primary clinical outcome in adults with the studied psychiatry condition, with significant improvements in clinical response, complete remission, biomarker normalisation, and quality of life at 12 months. The safety profile was acceptable and comparable between arms. These findings provide robust evidence to support the intervention as a preferred therapeutic option in this setting, and should inform guideline updates and clinical practice across Psychiatry.

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