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Lindqvist, P G; Merlo, Juan

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Low molecular weight heparin for repeated pregnancy loss: is it based on solid evidence?

P. G. LINDQVIST and J. MERLO
Departments of Obstetrics and Gynecology and Community Medicine, Malmö University Hospital, Malmö, Sweden

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See also Brenner B, Hoffman R, Carp H, Dultsky M, Younis J for the LIVE-ENOX Investigators. Efficacy and safety of two doses of enoxaparin in women with thrombophilia and recurrent pregnancy loss: the LIVE-ENOX study. This issue, pp. 227–9; Gris JC, Marés P. The long and winding road … towards LMWH for pregnancy loss. This issue, pp 224–6.

The subject of the study by Brenner and coworkers in this issue of Journal of Thrombosis and Haemostasis [1] is of the utmost importance. Between 0.5% and 1% of women have repeated pregnancy loss (RPL), which represents both an individual misfortune and medical concerns. The uteroplacental circulation resembles venous circulation in terms of its low pressure and low flow velocity, and may be particularly susceptible to thrombotic complications in thrombophilic women. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that prophylactic treatment to combat the thrombophilic process may be useful in women with RPL. The Brenner study finds that treatment with enoxaparin was effective and safe, and that both 40 mg and 80 mg enoxaparin doses were equally effective. Nevertheless, even if a therapeutic option is greatly desired and the results are encouraging, it needs to be judged according to the strength of its clinical evidence. This is especially important with regard to low molecular weight heparin (LMWH) treatment during pregnancy, which has been related to a 4-fold increased risk of profuse blood loss at delivery [2].

To place the paper by Brenner and coworkers in perspective, a number of critical comments regarding the background, design and conclusions of this study may be offered. Readers may find that the Brenner study is, in fact, not an investigation of the effect of enoxaparin in the prevention of RPL, for it assumes that its efficacy is already evident. The study compares the efficacy and safety of two different doses of enoxaparin. No arm of this clinical trial represents absence of treatment (the most common therapeutic alternative today). The main argument offered by the authors for performing their clinical trial is a previous observational study led by the same principal author [3] in which 50 women with RPL and thrombophilia were followed through 61 pregnancies. These women were treated with either 40 mg or 80 mg of enoxaparin daily. In comparing the outcomes of these 61 treated pregnancies with those of historical pregnancies in the same 50 women, the risk of RPL appeared lower in the pregnancies treated with enoxaparin.

In our view this observational study presents such weaknesses that make it inappropriate to use as a source of reference. First, the study did not consider that some pregnancies were actually carried by the same women, a circumstance requiring special analytical handling [4]. Secondly, by comparing women with themselves using a ‘before–after’ approach there is a clear risk of regression towards the mean. This phenomenon expresses itself as a higher prospective probability of pregnancy success in women with the worst history and their expected pregnancy success rate in next pregnancy will be about 60–80% [5,6]. Thus, the results of the previous observational study appears heavily biased and gives no evidence for concluding that LMWH prevent fetal loss in women with RPL. The authors also cited a study by Gris and coworkers [7] that did not deal with RPL. In fact, there are currently no randomized studies providing evidence of efficacy of LMWH treatment in women with RPL.

The earlier observational study may, however, suggest the hypothesis that LMWH treatment prevents pregnancy loss in women with RPL. The logical design to test this hypothesis would therefore be to compare treatment and no treatment. Surprisingly, the authors make a equivalence trial by comparing two different doses of enoxaparin, something which is obviously out of place. For example, using the design applied by the authors, one cannot validate whether enoxaparin increases the risk of bleeding or decreases the risk of pregnancy loss. The fact that the risk of bleeding and the risk of pregnancy loss were similar in women with different doses of enoxaparin is not informative in this context.

In summary, the fundamental appropriateness of the trial performed by Brenner and coworkers appears open to question. The trial does not follow the CONSORT recommendations (a statement that lists 21 items that should be included in a randomized trial) regarding clinical trials and has
Figures recalculated to only include first trimester fetal loss

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Study Group (FVL + /−)</th>
<th>Control Group (FVL + /−)</th>
<th>Odds ratios (95% CI)</th>
<th>Power (β)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rai (2001)</td>
<td>59/904</td>
<td>12/150</td>
<td>0.8 (0.4-2.0)</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reznikoff-Etievant (2001)</td>
<td>27/260</td>
<td>11/240</td>
<td>2.4 (1.2-5.0)</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finan (2002)</td>
<td>45/110</td>
<td>11/67</td>
<td>3.5 (1.7-7.5)</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Younis (2000)</td>
<td>6/37</td>
<td>8/139</td>
<td>3.1 (1.0-10.0)</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatini (2000)</td>
<td>6/59</td>
<td>8/121</td>
<td>1.6 (0.5-4.8)</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carp (2002)</td>
<td>2/70</td>
<td>5/82</td>
<td>0.5 (0.1-2.4)</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foka (2000)</td>
<td>9/61</td>
<td>4/100</td>
<td>4.2 (1.2-14.1)</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandone (1997)</td>
<td>2/27</td>
<td>5/118</td>
<td>1.8 (0.3-9.8)</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balasch (1997)</td>
<td>1/55</td>
<td>1/50</td>
<td>0.9 (0.06-14.9)</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Power to detect a doubled carriership rate in study group as compared to given control group

Let us now assume that the efficacy of enoxaparin was already established and the approach of comparing two different doses was a plausible one. The authors state that their ‘data demonstrate, in a large study population of women with thrombophilia: that both doses of enoxaparin are equally effective’. Conclusions of ‘equality’ convey special difficulties, as they need be grounded on extremely well-executed trials having no risk of therapeutic contamination and possessing sufficient statistical power. The authors fail to show a power estimation, which is vital in equivalent study. It is an accepted axiom that ‘absence of evidence is not evidence of absence’ [23,24]. Although the authors have performed a multicenter trial, we do not know if randomization was conducted at the patient or hospital level. This aspect is very relevant. If at the patient level, there is a high risk of therapeutic ‘contamination’ of the patients within the same hospitals, which will produce dilution bias and an underestimation of the possible effects of the different enoxaparin doses. To counteract the effect of contamination requires a larger sample. Because the design was a multicentre study, the appropriate sample size also needs to be larger than the estimated for a common trial on individual patients because of the existence of intracluster correlation [25].

A final concern is that of heterogenity. The definition of RPL used by the authors is heterogeneous: at least three first-trimester losses, at least two second-trimester losses or at least one third-trimester loss. With such wide inclusion criteria and with different prognoses in terms of live birth rates for these different categories, it is difficult to draw any clear conclusions. In addition, including women with one previous stillbirth among those with recurrent pregnancy loss also seems inappropriate. Similarly, ‘thrombophilia’ itself has a wide definition that includes conditions with very different prognoses of pregnancy success.

We conclude that the use of LMWH in the prevention of RPL is not based on solid evidence and that it is as yet too early for clinical implementation. Further studies are needed to determine which thrombophilias are related to RPL and if LMWH is benefical in the prevention of RPL.

References


