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 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rec.2020.06.005>
1885-5857/

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Melatonin, coronavirus, cardiovascular disease, and the geriatric emergency: let's use everything we have! Response



Melatonina, coronavirus, enfermedad cardiovascular y emergencia geriátrica: ¿usamos todo lo que tenemos! Respuesta

To the Editor,

We read with interest the Letter to the Editor by Domínguez-Rodríguez et al. concerning our article¹ and suggesting that melatonin treatment may be useful in elderly patients with COVID-19. The authors propose that this treatment could prevent the infection or lessen its severity, which is more pronounced among the elderly.² Melatonin has anti-inflammatory and antioxidant activity, thus attenuating the proinflammatory cytokine storm and neutralizing the production of free radicals to help preserve cell integrity and prevent lung damage.³ Melatonin levels drop significantly with age, an effect that has been related to the development of chronic inflammatory processes, including some cardiovascular diseases. Consequently, its use in elderly patients may be particularly relevant. Exogenous supplementation has been shown to be safe and to have few adverse effects, although these effects are diminished when melatonin is administered consistent with its circadian rhythm of production.³ Nevertheless, there are a paucity of data on its clinical benefit in various situations, and no evidence is available on how it affects established prognostic variables.⁴

We agree with the authors on the need to design and implement new therapies rapidly and effectively in the context of this pandemic. However, we should not neglect the perspective gained from a formal evaluation of any potential treatments. The pathophysiologic plausibility and the available experimental and clinical data are promising, and studies could be designed to

evaluate the potential efficacy of melatonin in COVID-19. However, they are insufficient to recommend routine clinical use as proposed by the authors. In our opinion, ethical considerations require that the therapies we administer to our patients be supported by sufficient rigorous evidence, even during emergencies.

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Available online 5 August 2020

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Do we have a new drug for heart rate control in patients with permanent atrial fibrillation?



¿Hay un nuevo fármaco disponible para el control de la frecuencia cardiaca de pacientes con fibrilación auricular permanente?

To the Editor,

We have read with great interest the article by Fontenla et al.¹ describing the design of the BRAKE-AF project, which will analyze

the safety and efficacy of ivabradine for heart rate control in patients with permanent atrial fibrillation.

Ivabradine has shown beneficial effects in patients with ischemic heart disease and in patients with heart failure and reduced ejection fraction.² The drug has a good safety profile, as it does not affect cardiac contractility or blood pressure due to its selective I_f current inhibition. Until recently, the negative chronotropic effect of the drug was considered the result of its selective effect in the sinus node and, therefore, it was not recommended for heart rate control in patients with atrial fibrillation. However, recent studies have suggested that ivabradine slows atrioventricular (AV) conduction and may be beneficial in these patients.³ Fontenla et al.¹ have proposed this study, as this effect is biologically plausible (the AV node does have I_f currents) and this hypothesis is supported by several experimental animal studies⁴ and small human trials.⁵

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rec.2020.09.004>

The BRAKE-AF project is a promising undertaking, as the therapeutic armamentarium available for heart rate control in patients with permanent atrial fibrillation is scant and insufficient in a significant percentage of patients. In fact, beta-blockers, which are the most effective drugs in this context, do not achieve adequate heart rate control in 30% of patients.⁶ Furthermore, calcium channel blockers are contraindicated in the presence of severe ventricular dysfunction, and digoxin has a narrow therapeutic margin and is associated with higher mortality.⁷ As a result, some patients require pacemaker implantation and AV node ablation to achieve adequate heart rate control.⁸ New drugs with negative chronotropic effects could add to current therapeutic options and may help minimize invasive treatment.

The project is based on a sound design with 2 differentiated arms: an experimental arm to analyze the effect of the drug on the action potential of the AV node and a noninferiority clinical trial. The aim of the clinical trial, which compares the efficacy of digoxin with ivabradine, is rational, as digoxin is less successful in controlling heart rate than beta-blockers or L-type calcium channel blockers. The trial has several limitations. In particular, it uses an unblinded approach, in view of the effects of digoxin on the surface electrocardiogram, and includes patients with and without ventricular dysfunction. Ivabradine could have a different effect in patients with ventricular dysfunction; therefore, based on the results of the trial, a second study could be undertaken in this subgroup.

We look forward to the publication of the results of the BRAKE-AF project to learn the therapeutic possibilities of ivabradine in this context.

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Do we have a new drug for heart rate control in patients with permanent atrial fibrillation? Response



¿Hay un nuevo fármaco disponible para el control de la frecuencia cardíaca de pacientes con fibrilación auricular permanente? Respuesta

To the Editor,

We thank Drs Rivas-Gándara and Francisco-Pascual for their interest shown in the BRAKE-AF project.¹

There is indeed evidence to suggest that ivabradine could be effective for rate control in permanent atrial fibrillation (AF). Following publication of its efficacy in a patient with poorly-controlled AF,² we were aware that to “make this hypothesis a reality” we would need to conduct a clinical trial.³

Permanent AF is the most common form of AF yet, surprisingly, new drugs for rate control have not been developed in the past 30 years. The industrial development of antiarrhythmic drugs is increasingly uncommon, probably because it involves investment that is risky and/or with small profit margins; this means that clinicians must assess the antiarrhythmic effect of drugs that are marketed for other indications, as is the case with ranolazine.⁴ We would like to point out that the BRAKE-AF project was undertaken with public funding only and thanks to the generous effort of independent

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Available online 18 September 2020

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rec.2020.07.013>
1885-5857/

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investigators: cardiologists from several hospitals and pharmacologists from the *Universidad Complutense de Madrid*.

Our trial is currently in the recruitment phase, and bears the difficulties inherent to any clinical trial with the added impact of the recent COVID-19 outbreak. Like Rivas-Gándara and other authors,⁵ we hope that the BRAKE-AF trial will answer the question of whether there is a new drug for rate control in AF. If so, the next question will be, “Could ivabradine improve prognosis in patients with permanent AF?”

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Available online 14 October 2020