

Alpha-2 agonists for sedation of mechanically ventilated adults in intensive care units: a systematic review

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Declared competing interests of authors: Moira Cruickshank, Lorna Henderson, Graeme MacLennan, Cynthia Fraser, Marion Campbell and Miriam Brazzelli's institution received funding from the UK Department of Health to undertake this work. Anthony Gordon has received research support and speaker fees from Orion Pharmaceuticals [a manufacturer of dexmedetomidine (Dexdor®, Orion Corporation)] outside the submitted work. He also declares research support and/or personal/speaker fees from Tenax Therapeutics Inc., from HCA International and from Ferring Pharmaceuticals Inc., and former membership of the Baxter Healthcare Advisory Board (1-day meeting, 10 September 2012) in relation to previous research projects. Marion Campbell declares former membership of the National Institute for Health Research Health Services and Delivery Research Researcher-led Board (2009–15).

Published March 2016

DOI: 10.3310/hta20250

Plain English summary

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Health Technology Assessment 2016; Vol. 20: No. 25

DOI: 10.3310/hta20250

NIHR Journals Library www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk

Plain English summary

Sedation involves the use of drugs to produce a state of calm or sleep in patients admitted to intensive care units (ICUs).

The most common drugs used in ICUs fall into three groups: (1) propofol (Diprivan[®], AstraZeneca); (2) benzodiazepines [including midazolam (Hypnovel[®], Roche) and lorazepam (Ativan[®], Pfizer)]; and (3) alpha-2 adrenergic receptor agonists [including clonidine (Catapres[®], Boehringer Ingelheim) and dexmedetomidine (Dexdor[®], Orion Corporation)]. The effects of sedation vary between drugs and none has been shown to be clearly better than the others. The drugs called alpha-2 agonists (clonidine and dexmedetomidine) appear to be different in that patients can be awakened more easily, are better able to communicate and do not suffer from breathing problems which can occur with other drugs.

We looked at all clinical studies that have been done on these drugs in people admitted to ICUs who required assistance with breathing on a ventilator. We assessed (1) the effects of dexmedetomidine compared with clonidine and (2) the effects of dexmedetomidine compared with propofol and benzodiazepines. Results from 18 clinical studies (2489 patients) showed that, compared with other drugs, dexmedetomidine reduced the length of stay in ICUs and the time until the patient was ready to have the breathing tube removed. More people treated with dexmedetomidine, however, suffered from a slow heart rate. The numbers of deaths and other bad effects were similar regardless of the drug used. Overall, the quality of the clinical studies was low and there were some uncertainties regarding the data used for the analyses. Further clinical studies are needed to evaluate the effects of clonidine and to identify which patients are more likely to benefit from dexmedetomidine.

ISSN 1366-5278 (Print)

ISSN 2046-4924 (Online)

Impact factor: 5.027

Health Technology Assessment is indexed in MEDLINE, CINAHL, EMBASE, The Cochrane Library and the ISI Science Citation Index.

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This report

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HTA programme as project number 13/73/01. The contractual start date was in October 2014. The draft report began editorial review in May 2015 and was accepted for publication in November 2015. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The HTA editors and publisher have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors' report and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the draft document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this report.

This report presents independent research funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). The views and opinions expressed by authors in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HTA programme or the Department of Health. If there are verbatim quotations included in this publication the views and opinions expressed by the interviewees are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily reflect those of the authors, those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HTA programme or the Department of Health.

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