Brain and spinal stimulation therapies for phantom limb pain: a systematic review

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Declared competing interests of authors: Sam Eldabe reports grants and personal fees from Medtronic plc (Minneapolis, MN, USA) and personal fees from Abbott Laboratories (Chicago, IL, USA) and Boston Scientific (Marlborough, MA, USA) outside the submitted work.

Plain English summary

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Health Technology Assessment 2018; Vol. 22: No. 62
DOI: 10.3310/hta22620

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Phantom limb pain (PLP) is pain perceived by amputees in the missing part of their limb. Electrical stimulation of the brain or spine can be used to treat long-term PLP when other treatments have not worked, but there is limited knowledge on how effective it is. Brain stimulation can be non-invasive (electrodes placed on the scalp) or invasive (electrodes inserted into the brain during an operation). Stimulation of the spine is an invasive therapy. This project aimed to find out which types of brain and spine stimulation seem likely to be best for treating PLP.

We identified and studied all the key data from all relevant research publications and also asked NHS clinicians for their views. Results from studies of non-invasive brain stimulation treatments showed that they may improve PLP for a short time after treatment, but there were no long-term data. Results from studies of invasive stimulation treatments suggested that, although many patients benefited from short-term pain reduction, far fewer had long-term benefit.

Other types of study showed that around one-quarter of patients with chronic PLP found their pain to be either moderately or severely limiting or bothersome. The survey of clinicians suggested that spinal stimulation is often used for PLP in the NHS, with most of the clinicians considering it to be at least sometimes effective. There were fewer positive views on how well brain stimulation worked.

Based on all these findings, specific recommendations were made for conducting future research studies that should produce much more reliable results.
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This report

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HTA programme as project number 16/58/02. The contractual start date was in May 2017. The draft report began editorial review in January 2018 and was accepted for publication in May 2018. 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 and Social Care. 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 and Social Care.

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