Ten-year follow-up of a randomised trial of drainage, irrigation and fibrinolytic therapy (DRIFT) in infants with post-haemorrhagic ventricular dilatation

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Declared competing interests of authors: none

Published February 2019
DOI: 10.3310/hta23040

Plain English summary

Drainage, irrigation and fibrinolytic therapy

Health Technology Assessment 2019; Vol. 23: No. 4
DOI: 10.3310/hta23040

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Bleeding into the fluid spaces of the brain is a common complication of being born very early. Such bleeds often block the normal fluid flow around the brain, causing expansion of the fluid spaces (ventricles), pressure on the brain and serious disability.

The standard treatment is to drain off excess fluid with a needle. This may need to be repeated and often leads to further complications. An alternative treatment is to wash out the blood clot and clear the effects of bleeding. This is called drainage, irrigation and fibrinolytic therapy (DRIFT).

Fifteen years ago (2003–6), the new DRIFT washout treatment was compared with standard treatment in a randomised trial. A total of 77 premature babies with bleeding in, and expansion of, the brain spaces were studied. At age 2 years, the babies in the washout (DRIFT) group were doing slightly better. Fewer of them had severe learning problems than those in the standard treatment group.

In the present study, we followed up those babies we could trace to school age. We managed to examine 52 out of the 66 surviving babies.

DRIFT improved cognitive function and reduced the need for special education at age 10 years. This is the first treatment to show improved brain function in premature babies with this condition.

DRIFT treatment was slightly more expensive. However, the long-term benefits were such that, after taking into account the costs of special schooling, the treatment was probably cheaper overall.

Despite these results, it is not possible to implement DRIFT in the NHS right away. Few centres have the skills and expertise to deliver DRIFT safely and, with improvements in survival of the most immature babies, those who would be eligible for DRIFT are now even more premature than those included in the original trial. Therefore, we recommend the development of DRIFT for the NHS through a further implementation trial based in a few specialist centres.
Health Technology Assessment

ISSN 1366-5278 (Print)
ISSN 2046-4924 (Online)
Impact factor: 4.513

Health Technology Assessment is indexed in MEDLINE, CINAHL, EMBASE, The Cochrane Library and the Clarivate Analytics 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 12/35/61. The contractual start date was in September 2014. The draft report began editorial review in November 2016 and was accepted for publication in August 2017. 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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