Uterotonic drugs to prevent postpartum haemorrhage: a network meta-analysis

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Declared competing interests of authors: Ioannis Gallos, Metin Gülmezoglu, Justus Hofmeyr and Arri Coomarasamy have been involved in one or more previous or ongoing trials related to the use of uterotonics for the prevention of postpartum haemorrhage that were considered for inclusion in this review. Ferring Pharmaceuticals (Saint-Prex, Switzerland) and Novartis Pharmaceuticals UK Ltd (Surrey, UK) have supplied carbetocin and oxytocin to these studies. Ioannis Gallos, Metin Gülmezoglu, Justus Hofmeyr and Arri Coomarasamy have not participated in decisions regarding inclusion of these trials in this review or any tasks related to them such as data extraction or quality assessment. Arri Coomarasamy is involved in a World Health Organization-sponsored randomised controlled trial of carbetocin versus oxytocin, supported by Merck for Mothers (Merck & Co., Inc., Kenilworth, NJ, USA). Metin Gülmezoglu was involved in a large multicentre trial included in the review as part of the central co-ordination unit. As part of the central co-ordination unit, he is also involved in an ongoing World Health Organization-sponsored randomised controlled trial of carbetocin versus oxytocin supported by Merck for Mothers. Abi Merriel is part-funded by Ammalife (a UK-registered charity 1120236) and the Birmingham Women’s NHS Foundation Trust. Harry Gee and Arri Coomarasamy are trustees of Ammalife. Jonathan Deeks is a member of the Health Technology Assessment (HTA) Commissioning Board and the HTA Efficient Study and Designs Board.

Published February 2019
DOI: 10.3310/hta23090
Plain English summary

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Health Technology Assessment 2019; Vol. 23: No. 9
DOI: 10.3310/hta23090

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Postpartum haemorrhage (PPH) is the most common reason why mothers die in childbirth worldwide. Although most healthy women can cope well with blood loss after birth, some do not, and this can pose a serious risk to their health and even life. To reduce blood loss after birth, the routine administration of a drug to contract the uterus (uterotonic) has become standard practice across the world. This research seeks to identify which is the most effective and cost-effective drug.

Different drugs have been used for reducing the occurrence of PPH. They include oxytocin, misoprostol, ergometrine, carbetocin, and combinations of these drugs, each with different effectiveness and side effects. The study synthesised the available evidence to compare all of these drugs and combinations thereof. After putting the results of all available comparisons together in a network, a ranking among them was calculated, and provided robust effectiveness and side-effect profiles for each drug and their associated costs.

The study included 137 randomised trials, involving a total of 87,466 women. The results suggested that ergometrine plus oxytocin, carbetocin and misoprostol plus oxytocin are the most effective strategies for preventing PPH and are more effective than the currently recommended drug, oxytocin. Each of these three strategies had almost 100% probability of being ranked first, second or third most effective. Oxytocin was ranked fourth with an almost 0% probability of being ranked in the top three. Ergometrine plus oxytocin and misoprostol plus oxytocin were the worst drug combinations for side effects, with carbetocin having the most favourable side-effect profile. Carbetocin could prevent approximately one further event of PPH out of three in comparison with oxytocin. However, existing carbetocin studies were small and of poor quality. There is need for a large high-quality study comparing carbetocin with the current standard treatment of oxytocin for the prevention of PPH. The cost analyses of the alternative drug strategies remain inconclusive.
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This report

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HTA programme as project number 14/139/17. The contractual start date was in May 2015. The draft report began editorial review in November 2016 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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