Ineffectiveness of chloroquine antenatal prophylaxis in East of Democratic Republic of Congo (RDC)

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TROPICAL DOCTOR, 2003, 33, 177–178

Introduction

In sub-Saharan Africa, malaria is one of the main public health problems. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends routine malaria drug prophylaxis throughout pregnancy in endemic areas. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, despite the emergence of chloroquine-resistant Plasmodium falciparum strains in East Africa and known difficulties with compliance, the prophylactic scheme is based on an initial curative dose of chloroquine, followed by weekly prophylactic doses until delivery.

Methods

To assess the current effectiveness of chloroquine prophylaxis and to compare its benefits when given either early or late, 621 women attending antenatal clinics in the Rutshuru District (Northern Kivu) were included at their first visit in either a second or third trimester prophylaxis group, depending on gestation. They received a supply of chloroquine tablets with instructions to self-administer 300 mg weekly until delivery. Blood and placental biopsy specimens were taken at delivery. Results were compared with a group of women (n = 61) without malaria prophylaxis.

Results

The maternal and newborn outcomes did not differ between the two groups (Table 1): 26.3% versus 27.4% had circulating malaria parasite (95% confidence interval [CI] of difference = –7.3–9.5%) at the time of delivery, 29.5% versus 30.2% had malaria-associated placental lesions (95% CI of difference = –8.9–10.2%), 57.5% versus 51.9% had a haemoglobin <11 g/dL (95% CI of difference = –3.8–15.0%), 13% versus 13.1% had low birth weight infants (95% CI of difference = –6.2–6.2%)

References

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and 4.4% versus 2.7% of infants were stillborn (95% CI of difference = -1.6-5.0%). Proportions of malaria-associated fever were similar in the two groups. The compliance decreased with the number of months between first visit and delivery ($P < 0.001$). No women from the early group who had an opportunity to receive six prophylactic treatments ($n = 12$) actually received all six.

The proportion of low birth weight decreased from 21.9% for one treatment to 5.6% for five compliant treatments ($\chi^2$ for trend: $P = 0.058$). After adjustment for age, parity and education, which differed significantly between the groups, neither the treatment group nor the number of compliant treatments received was associated with any one of the outcomes. The outcomes in the treated group were similar to that of the non-treated group, except for the proportion of malaria-associated placental lesions that was lower in the treated group (see Table 1).

**Discussion**

Two main factors which may explain the poor effectiveness of chloroquine prophylaxis are a resistance of *P. falciparum* to chloroquine and a bad observance of treatment.

This is the first report evaluating chloroquine resistance in Northern Kivu. However, about 10% of 'protected women' from the two groups presented with malaria associated fever. This suggests that chloroquine resistance is present in the northern areas of Kivu several years after cases were first observed in Southern Kivu.$^{1,2}$ In spite of all efforts, including systematic visits at home, 33.1% (158/477) of mothers missed their appointments. The non-observance of weekly dose resulted in non-effective plasma drug level.$^{3}$ In addition, where self-medication was the principal alternative to low accessibility of health services (only 0.3 contact/year/inhabitant in Rutshuru district), a part of the drug dose was probably used to treat patients' relatives.

**Conclusion**

These results indicate a more than likely absence of effectiveness of the current strategy based on chloroquine prophylaxis given at any time during pregnancy in the Rutshuru district and urge for an alternative strategy against malaria.

**References**


