Anti-TNF therapy in Ankylosing Spondylitis (AS). Is it possible to suspend treatment?

La terapia anti-TNF en la espondilitis anquilosante (EA). ¿Es posible suspender el tratamiento?

Jordi Gratacos Masmitja* and Mireia Moreno Martinez-Losa

*Corresponding author.
E-mail address: jgratacosmas@gmail.com (J. Gratacos Masmitja).

From the therapeutic point of view, biological therapy (specifically, anti-TNF therapy) has been the most important event in spondyloarthritis treatment in the last decade. In patients with established ankylosing spondylitis (AS) (according to NY 1986 criteria), active and refractory to conventional therapy, anti-TNF therapy achieves a good clinical response. However, only 20%-30% present an excellent response, considering "excellent response" as that defined by the criteria on partial remission established by the Assessment of Spondyloarthritis International Society (ASAS), in which the patient would be apparently asymptomatic. When anti-TNF therapy is administered to patients with a scarcely developed condition (pre-radiological stage), it is important to highlight that the percentage who manifest an excellent response (ASAS partial remission) is of about 40%-50%, and thus significantly superior to that observed in patients in whom the disease is more established. These data suggest that, as is the case with rheumatoid arthritis (RA), early administration of treatment is essential to obtain a consistent, prolonged response. The new ASAS group classification criteria for axial and peripheral forms could be of great importance in establishing an early diagnosis and treatment that improves the therapeutic expectations of those patients. However, are these data sufficient to consider the possibility of discarding biological therapy in patients with AS?

From a logical point of view, it could be thought that suspending the treatment systematically for all patients is not an adequate option, given that only 40%-50% of patients in the early stages and 20%-30% in advanced stages present a consistent clinical response (ASAS partial remission). Various studies have analysed the consequences of systematic suspension of treatment on AS patients; the results, independently of which anti-TNF drug was being used and treatment duration, showed clinical reactivation in the short-medium term in up to 75% of cases after 6 months and in over 90% after 12 months. When the factors associated with reactivation were analysed, it was observed, as expected, that the degree of clinical activity at the time of treatment suspension, especially measured through C-reactive protein (CRP), as well as age and disease evolution time were important factors in the onset of reactivation. Furthermore, Breban et al compared treatment with infliximab on-demand versus treatment following the drug specifications on the technical datasheet on patients with active AS. They observed that patients with on-demand treatment presented a significantly lower clinical response (27% vs 7%, ASAS partial remission) compared to the group with regulated treatment, which seemed to discourage the on-demand therapeutic alternative. However, in clinical practice, there are numerous patients with AS who present an excellent clinical response (apparent clinical remission), in whom it is possible to adjust the treatment (reduce doses and/or extend the drug administration period) without this having any repercussions on the good clinical response shown by these patients; in some cases, treatment can even be interrupted for a certain period. When analysing the possible causes of this dissociation between results obtained in therapeutic trials and clinical practice, it is possible to observe that the patients included in these trials were ones with a very evolved disease (the average period of evolution was 14 years), with a considerable degree of disability, and that treatment was systematically suspended, independently of the degree of clinical remission. In this regard, the published data suggests that interrupting treatment in all patients, or even in the majority, with a good clinical response is not an acceptable option. However, this assertion does not rule out the possibility of contemplating the interruption of treatment in patients who present a real clinical remission. Evaluating this alternative is especially interesting considering recent studies showing that the reintroduction of anti-TNF therapy in patients with AS safely achieves levels of therapeutic response similar to those initially observed before the interruption.

Nevertheless, is it possible to define clinical remission in a patient with AS?

There is only one validated definition for remission, although it is partial (ASAS partial remission). Patients who meet these criteria are practically asymptomatic, but these criteria were obtained from the results of five therapeutic trials with NSAIDs, that is, with a drug considered only for symptomatic treatment of the disease. That is
why objective variables such as CRP or outcome variables were not included, making the definition of true remission more difficult. Clinical remission could be defined as absence of signs and symptoms, as well as absence of disease progression (no functional impairment and no progression of structural damage), all during an acceptable period of time (a minimum of 6 months). This definition implies two concepts differing from the ASAS partial remission definition. The first is the concept of progression remission and the second maintains that state for a certain time before considering a remission. However, this concept of remission creates a number of problems in the case of AS: variability in assessing inflammatory activity, irregularity in evaluating manifestations (especially extra-articular ones) and difficulty in predicting structural damage progression.

Subjective variables are generally used in the assessment of inflammatory activity. Objective variables such as CRP or ESR have low sensitivity, especially in axial forms, and they only present a discreet correlation with the other clinical variables used, as well as with outcome variables. Recently the ASAS group has published a new composite index for assessing the inflammatory activity in spondyloarthritis (ASDAS), in which clinical variables and biological variables are combined and weighted. The preliminary data with this new scale are especially good, and levels of activity including a period of time (a minimum of 6 months) long enough to establish its persistence over time. The new instruments for assessing disease activity (the Ankylosing Spondylitis Disease Activity Score, ASDAS), the introduction of ultrasound (to assess the enthesitis), and the NMR in some cases can be of great use in establishing the concept of true clinical remission.

One could conclude that clinical remission in patients with AS following biological treatment should be represented by an absence of signs and symptoms in any location, along with the absence of disease progression during a certain period (approximately 6 months) long enough to establish its persistence over time. The new instruments for assessing disease activity (the Ankylosing Spondylitis Disease Activity Score, ASDAS), the introduction of ultrasound (to assess the enthesitis), and the NMR in some cases can be of great use in establishing the concept of true clinical remission.

To conclude, in my opinion we could say that:

- The systematic interruption of biological treatment in patients with AS is not a recommendable option, not even in patients with a good clinical response, given that it is usually accompanied by a nearly constant clinical reactivation in the short term.
- There is no validated definition of clinical remission in patients with AS. A hypothetical definition of remission in these patients should include the absence of signs and symptoms of the disease in any location, associated with no disease evolution during a period of time sufficient to establish its persistence in time.
- It is possible to consider adjusting the treatment (change of dose and/or period of administration) in patients with AS who have shown clinical remission (as defined previously). Furthermore, treatment could be temporarily interrupted if this clinical remission were to become established. This option is especially interesting, given that the reintroduction of anti-TNF treatment is safe and effective when there is disease recurrence.

References