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Article (Accepted Version)

Iwuji, Collins C and Siedner, Mark J (2019) Circulating resistance to first-line HIV drug regimens in sub-Saharan Africa: a sheep in wolf's clothing? *The Lancet HIV*. ISSN 2405-4704

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Circulating resistance to first-line HIV drug regimens in sub-Saharan Africa: A sheep in wolf's clothing?

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Word count: 744, 1 Table

Pre-treatment HIV drug resistance (PDR) is increasing in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), driven by increasing resistance to non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitor (NNRTI) drugs¹. This has led the WHO to recommend that countries with a population prevalence of NNRTIs resistance >10% adopt alternate first-line regimens, or consider pre-therapy drug resistance testing to guide selection of antiretroviral therapy (ART)^{1,2}. In response, many countries in SSA are now rolling out dolutegravir-based first-line ART. These recommendations rely on the theoretical basis that efavirenz (EFV) efficacy is significantly curtailed in the presence of NNRTI resistance and that drug resistance testing prior to initiation of EFV-based ART enables selection of more efficacious regimens, respectively. Yet, for these theories to be true and support guideline changes, various criteria must be met: 1) EFV efficacy must be significantly reduced in the face of circulating NNRTI resistance; 2) PDR must be of sufficient prevalence that testing for it will have population-level effects on viral suppression and 3) pre-treatment drug resistance testing for selection of optimal regimens will improve outcomes. Yet, clinical data in support of these theories are either contradicting or altogether lacking.

In this issue of *Lancet HIV*, Chung and colleagues³ attempt to resolve the latter two of these criteria by evaluating whether using an oligonucleotide assay (OLA) to detect genotypic drug resistance to NNRTIs at codons K103N, Y181C, G190A, and to lamivudine at M184V, could improve virologic suppression after initiation of NNRTI-based ART in Kenya. The investigators randomized 991 participants to either standard of care without pre-ART resistance testing or use of the OLA assay to tailor ART regimen selection. They found no significant difference in virological failure between the OLA-guided therapy arm (8.5%) and the standard of care arm (9.7%) after 12 months on ART. Amongst the 9.4% of individuals with PDR, as defined by the presence of pre-specified OLA-detected mutations, virologic failure was lower in the OLA-guided therapy arm (14%) than the SOC arm (50%). Nonetheless, PDR testing was not found to be beneficial in the overall cohort. A few limitations include the open-label nature of the study and lack of evaluation of the clinical impact of other nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitor PDR except the M184V. For example, the presence of the H208Y and T215Y mutations may lead to hyper-susceptibility to NNRTIs⁴

There were two main reasons why pre-treatment resistance testing did not appear to demonstrate improvements in virologic outcomes in this study. First, although HIV drug resistance reduces treatment efficacy, this study reinforces that it by no means abrogates it. Approximately 48% of individuals in the SOC arm with PDR (2% cut-off) achieved virologic suppression at 12 months. Second, PDR was not significantly common to make testing for it to improve outcomes on a population level. Indeed, these results highlight that, unless PDR is exceptionally common, testing for it is unlikely to significantly impact care (Table).

This study will not resolve the ongoing debates about selection of optimal first-line ART regimens in areas with a high prevalence of circulating resistance. It does add to a growing number of studies demonstrating high efficacy with EFV-based ART in such areas. The findings from this study is similar to another in rural South Africa, with high virological suppression (95%), despite the presence of NNRTI PDR (8.8%)⁵. Similarly, in the ADVANCE study, EFV achieved similar suppression rates as dolutegravir as first-line ART, without pre-therapy resistance testing, and notably achieved >95% in the per-protocol analysis⁶. These data stand in contrast to modelling studies, which generally apply lower virologic suppression rates with EFV in the face of NNRTI resistance, and partly informed the WHO guidelines^{7,8}.

In summary, this well-designed randomized study by Chung et al, provides a significant advance for the field by helping to clarify the limited role for PDR testing at the population level in low-resource settings, even in areas with high prevalence of circulating drug resistance. It also adds important data to the debate about optimal first-line regimens in resource-limited settings where programmatic guidelines and relatively limited treatment options drive the vast majority of regimen decision making. Although beyond the scope of this review, additional data on the possible side effects and toxicity of dolutegravir, including neural tube defects⁹ and weight gain⁶, add to the complexity around the optimal choice of first-line regimens in the region. Thus, while dolutegravir maintains many advantages over efavirenz in terms of potency, costs of generic production, and side effect profiles¹⁰ its advantage in terms of management in individuals with drug resistance remains to be fully clarified.

Declaration of interest: CI has received research grants and honorarium for consulting services from Gilead Sciences. MS has nothing to disclose.

Table. Case base scenario for number needed to treat for 12 months according to pre-treatment drug resistance (PDR) prevalence observed in OLA (0.0975) and SOC (0.0769) arms in Chung et al. and simulations at different levels of PDR prevalence

| Case base | OLA arm | | | Standard of care arm | | | Absolute diff. in prob. of VF | NNT |
|-------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|------|-------------------|-------------------------------|------|
| | PDR prevalence 0.0975 | | | PDR prevalence 0.0769 | | | | |
| | N | Virologic failure (VF) | Probability of VF | N | VF | Probability of VF | | |
| Total | 400 | 34 | 0.08500 | 403 | 39 | 0.09677 | 0.01177 | 84.9 |
| Wild type | 361 | 28 | 0.07756 | 372 | 24 | 0.06452 | | |
| 2-9% | 4 | 1 | 0.25000 | 5 | 2 | 0.40000 | | |
| 10%+ | 35 | 5 | 0.14286 | 26 | 13 | 0.50000 | | |
| PDR | 39 | 6 | 0.15385 | 31 | 15 | 0.48387 | | |
| Simulations | PDR prevalence | | | PDR prevalence | | | | |
| | | 0.10 | 0.08519 | | 0.10 | 0.10645 | 0.02126 | 47.0 |
| | | 0.15 | 0.08900 | | 0.15 | 0.12741 | 0.03841 | 26.0 |
| | | 0.20 | 0.09281 | | 0.20 | 0.14839 | 0.05558 | 18.0 |
| | | 0.25 | 0.09663 | | 0.25 | 0.16935 | 0.07272 | 13.8 |
| | | 0.30 | 0.10044 | | 0.30 | 0.19032 | 0.08988 | 11.1 |

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