



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Clinical and economic burden of herpes zoster and postherpetic neuralgia in patients from the National Skin Centre, Singapore

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: Dec 17, 2014

Revised: Mar 15, 2015

Accepted: Apr 8, 2015

Keywords:

clinical and economic burden

herpes zoster

postherpetic neuralgia

ABSTRACT

Background/Objectives: There is a scarcity of recent data on the burden of herpes zoster (HZ) and postherpetic neuralgia (PHN) in Southeast Asia. We evaluated the prevalence, demographics, and disease burden of HZ and PHN in patients aged ≥ 50 years seen at a tertiary dermatological referral center, the National Skin Centre (NSC), Singapore.

Methods: We carried out a retrospective cohort analysis of NSC patient electronic medical records spanning >3 years from January 2010 to March 2013. Data on patient demographics, clinical characteristics, and medical management were collected.

Results: A total of 347 cases of HZ or PHN were included in this study. The mean age was 66.5 years with equal proportions of men and women. The majority of patients (85.6%) were of Chinese ethnicity. Patients presented to the NSC at various disease stages including acute HZ (83.0%), subacute HZ (10.7%), or PHN (6.3%). The most commonly affected anatomic site was thoracic dermatome (41.2%) and the most common prodromal symptom was pain (81.8%). In addition, pain was present in various stages of HZ, and it was the most unbearable symptom experienced during illness (85.5%). Patients in the older age group were more likely to suffer from pain for ≥ 6 months than patients in the younger age group. Most of the patients received antiviral treatment including acyclovir (70.9%) and valaciclovir (13.5%). Among all the patients, 85.0% received analgesia with the most common drugs being amitriptyline (25.4%) and gabapentin (21.9%). PHN led to significantly higher economic burden with a total cost of 414.69 Singapore dollars per patient versus 267.26 Singapore dollars for a non-PHN patient.

Conclusion: HZ and PHN cause a significant clinical and economic burden in Singapore.

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Introduction

Herpes zoster (HZ), also called shingles, is a common infection caused by the reactivation of varicella-zoster virus (VZV) that is latent in the spinal and cranial sensory ganglia from the time of primary VZV infection (chickenpox).^{1–4} A vesicular skin rash in the

affected dermatome, commonly accompanied by acute pain, characterizes the acute phase of HZ. HZ is associated with pain, which occurs in various disease stages, either preceding, associated with, following, or enduring for several weeks after the HZ skin eruption. The most frequent debilitating complication is postherpetic neuralgia (PHN).^{5–9} PHN may persist for years and is often refractory to treatment.⁶

The incidence and severity of HZ and PHN increase with age, and is associated with a progressive decline in cell immunity to VZV.^{10–12} Antiviral medication, if given early in acute HZ, is able to reduce the severity and duration of the acute blistering eruptions, but has not been found to prevent the development of PHN.^{4,8} The zoster vaccine, Zostavax (Merck, USA), has been shown to decrease

Conflicts of interest: The authors declare that they have no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest related to the subject matter or materials discussed in this article.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.dsi.2015.04.002>

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significantly the incidence and severity of HZ and PHN among older patients.^{13–16} Zostavax has been approved for use in Singapore for adults aged ≥ 50 years of age since 2008. Studies on the prevalence and disease burden of HZ and PHN have been published from different countries including Australia,¹⁷ Italy,¹⁸ Taiwan,¹⁹ France,²⁰ Germany,²¹ Thailand,²² Belgium,²³ the United Kingdom,²⁴ Spain,²⁵ Sweden,²⁶ and South Korea.²⁷ The most recent study on disease burden of HZ and PHN in Singapore dates back to 1997.²⁸

Methods

We carried out a retrospective cohort study of patients diagnosed as having HZ or PHN in the National Skin Centre (NSC) who were aged ≥ 50 years from 2010 to 2013. The NSC is the largest public dermatology clinic in Singapore, with >1200 attendances/d. Clinical data and detailed treatment history were retrieved from electronic medical records. Data of demographics, presenting stage, anatomic site involvement, prodrome, impact of illness, treatment including antiviral medication and analgesics, comorbidities, and disease burden including economic burden due to HZ and PHN were analyzed.

The diagnosis of HZ was based on the characteristic clinical presentation of a dermatomal blistering eruption. Zoster-associated pain was defined as prodromal (pain occurring before the onset of blistering eruptions), acute pain (pain within 1 month of onset), subacute pain (pain within 1 month to 3 months of onset), and PHN (pain appearing or persisting 3 months after the onset of blistering eruptions).

Costs were presented in Singapore dollars (S\$). In 2013, S\$1 was equal to approximately US\$0.8. The overall economic burden due to HZ included healthcare cost and indirect costs. Healthcare cost was calculated as the sum of total treatment cost, consultation fees, and hospitalization fees. Indirect cost due to absenteeism from work was calculated as the number of days of medical leave (taken by patients aged ≤ 65 years) multiplied by daily wage quoted from the Comprehensive Labour Force Survey (2012),²⁹ from which the daily wage of S\$160.6 was estimated from a monthly income of S\$3480.

This study was approved by the National Healthcare Group Domain Specific Review Board ethics committee. Statistical analysis was performed using SAS version 9.2 (SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC, USA). Descriptive statistics were generated for all variables in the study. The two-sided *t* test was used to testify the difference in group means at the 5% significance level.

There was an average of 150–200 HZ patients seen in the NSC each year from 2003 to 2012 with the majority being of Chinese ethnicity. Based on the age distribution data of HZ from 2003 to 2012, we focused this study on those patients aged ≥ 50 years who were seen during period from January 2010 to March 2013.

Results

A total of 347 patients were included in this study. Table 1 shows the demographic data of our study cohort. The majority were Chinese (85.6%) with a small number of Malay, Indian, and other ethnicities (4.9%, 4.6%, and 4.9% retrospectively). These proportions reflected the general ethnic distribution in Singapore. Approximately half of the patients (50.6%) were women. The mean age of patients with HZ in our cohort was 66.5 years.

Because the NSC is a tertiary dermatological referral center, most of the patients would have sought treatment at either primary care or the emergency department before their first consultation, and therefore presented at the NSC in various stages of HZ. In this study, the majority of patients presented as acute HZ (83.0%), followed by subacute HZ (10.7%) and then PHN (6.3%; Figure 1).

Table 1 Number and percentage of herpes zoster patients by age, sex, and ethnicity seen in the Singapore National Skin Centre from January 2010 to March 2013.

Age (y)	50–59	60–69	70–79	80+	Total
Male	53 (15.3)	61 (17.6)	43 (12.4)	15 (4.3)	172 (49.6)
Female	40 (11.5)	63 (18.2)	48 (13.8)	24 (6.9)	175 (50.4)
Chinese	73 (21.0)	112 (32.3)	76 (21.9)	36 (10.4)	297 (85.6)
Malay	8 (2.3)	3 (0.9)	5 (1.4)	1 (0.3)	17 (4.9)
Indian	6 (1.7)	4 (1.2)	6 (1.7)	0 (0.0)	16 (4.6)
Others	6 (1.7)	5 (1.4)	4 (1.2)	2 (0.6)	17 (4.9)
Total	93 (26.8)	124 (35.7)	91 (26.2)	39 (11.2)	347 (100.0)

Data are presented as n (%).

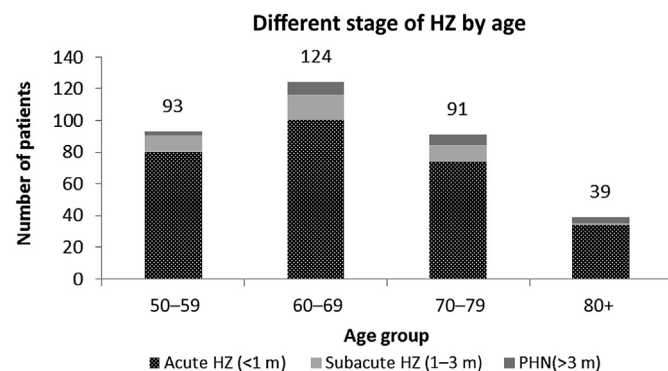


Figure 1 Stage of herpes zoster (HZ) stratified by age.

The frequency of the anatomic involvement of HZ is shown in Figure 2. The thoracic (41.2%) region was the most commonly affected region in our patients. Other common affected regions were the lumbar (17.3%), cervical (16.4%), ophthalmic (11.0%), maxillary (7.5%), and sacral (6.9%) regions, and the limbs (0.6%).

Most of our patients experienced prodromal symptoms. In this study, the various prodromal symptoms were pain, itch, and insomnia (81.8%, 15.9% and 4.3% respectively). After onset of HZ, patients reported that the most unbearable symptoms experienced were pain or discomfort (85.9%), blistering rashes followed by scarring (44.4%), and insomnia or sleep disturbance (4.0%).

Table 2 shows that the majority of patients (84.4%, *n* = 293) in this study received antiviral treatment, most commonly with acyclovir (70.9%). Approximately 55.6% of patients required treatment for pain control; the most commonly used medications were amitriptyline (25.4%), gabapentin (21.9%), tramadol (16.4%), paracetamol (13.5%), and oral nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (7.8%; Table 2). Due to the significant impact of pain on patients'

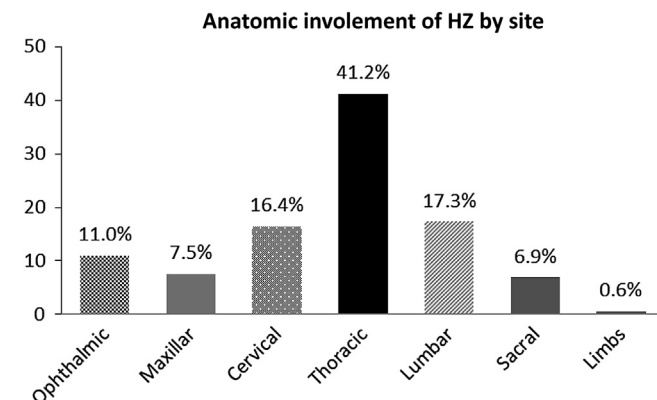


Figure 2 Anatomic involvement of herpes zoster by site.

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