ORIGINAL RESEARCH

International Journal of Surgery 12 (2014) 146–149

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Surgery

journal homepage: www.journal-surgery.net

Original research

Percutaneous posterior tibial nerve stimulation (PPTNS) in faecal incontinence associated with an anal sphincter lesion: Results of a prospective study

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 13 October 2013
Received in revised form
20 November 2013
Accepted 25 November 2013
Available online 1 December 2013

Keywords:
Faecal incontinence
Anal sphincter lesion
Sacral nerve stimulation
Posterior tibial nerve stimulation

ABSTRACT

Purpose: Establish the efficacy of posterior tibial nerve stimulation in treating faecal incontinence associated to sphincter defect.
Methods: Prospective study that included patients with faecal incontinence associated to sphincter lesions between 90 and 180°. Clinical anamnesis, physical examination, reverse visual analogic scale, incontinence diary and Wexner score were recorded at baseline and 6 months. Anal manometry was realized at baseline and 6 months.
Subjects underwent one 30-min session every week for 12 consecutive weeks and was continued with 6 additional sessions every 2 weeks.
Results: Sixteen patients were analysed, 15 women and 1 men, with a mean age of 56.5 years. The incontinence were obstetric origin (50%) and perineal surgeries (50%). Four patients who did not continue with the second stage.
Referring to the retention time, at baseline 12 patients (75%) did not bear even 1 min. At 6 months the retention time was <1 min in only 2 patients ($p = 0.008$).
Median Wexner baseline values were 10; at 6 months decrease to 5 ($p = 0.006$). The visual analogical scale (VAS) increased from 6 to 7.5 ($p > 0.05$). After 6 months, maximum resting pressure increased from 40.9 to 51 mmHg ($p < 0.001$) and maximum squeeze pressure from 82.5 to 94 mmHg ($p < 0.001$).
Conclusion: PTNS is an effective treatment for faecal incontinence associated to sphincter lesions because the number of incontinence episodes per week, the Wexner Score, the ability to defer defaecation and the manometric determinations improved significantly.

1. Introduction

Faecal incontinence (FI) is a prevalent and important condition, with a wide range of treatment options. An anal sphincter lesion (ASL) is the most common cause of faecal incontinence.[1,2] In these cases with ASL, when conservative therapy that include dietary modification, constipating medications, suppositories, physiotherapy/pelvic floor exercises and biofeedback has failed, the traditional surgical approach to this disabling condition is sphincter repair. However, long-term follow-up has shown that initial success tends to worsen over time with the reappearance of FI symptoms and decrease of satisfaction in approximately half the patients.[3,4]

Recently, sacral nerve stimulation (SNS) has been proposed as an effective therapeutic option for FI in patients with an anal sphincter lesion. However, SNS therapy has a high cost, requires an operating theatre and carries with it the risk of potentially significant complications.[5–7]

For this reason, posterior tibial nerve stimulation (PTNS) has been started using as an alternative or the first step before the utilization of the SNS. As it happened initially with the use of SNS, PTNS has been used only for FI associated with a neurogenic lesion or idiopathic, and evidence of trauma of the external anal sphincter (EAS) was an exclusion criterion.[8]

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1743-9191/$ – see front matter © 2013 Published by Elsevier Ltd on behalf of Surgical Associates Ltd.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijsu.2013.11.020

In our knowledge, the use of PTNS in this specific group of patients with ASL has not been reported and could be a good option. The aim of this prospective study was to establish further the efficacy of PTNS in treating faecal incontinence associated to sphincter defect.

2. Methods

We performed a prospective interventional study. Patients with faecal incontinence of diverse causes, who were refractory to medical treatments, were included in the study. We selected patients that endoanal ultrasonography showed sphincter lesions between 90 and 180°. Exclusion criteria included inability to communicate (e.g., patients with Alzheimer's disease, among others), acute anatomical problems with possible surgical resolution (less than 3 months) and unwillingness to consent to participating in the study. Gravity stages or Wexner scale degrees were not considered exclusion criteria.

The patients were evaluated by surgeons who were members of the coloproctology unit at the General University Hospital of Elche and Reina Sofia Hospital of Murcia. The patients were interviewed and underwent a physical examination (examination of the anal canal, determination of weakness of the sphincter, scars or overview features). Complementary tests included anal manometry and anal ultrasonography. We determined the Wexner scale. According to the data obtained from the incontinence diary, the patients were divided into the following three groups: patients with fewer than 3 episodes of faecal incontinence per week (mild), patients with 3 and 7 episodes per week (moderate) and patients with more than 7 episodes per week (severe). Their perception of the degree of incontinence was quantified with a visual analogic scale (VAS). A reverse scale was used, with 0 being the worst and 10 the best.

After determining the initial diagnosis, the first 12 sessions of the percutaneous tibial neurostimulation (PTNS process were performed weekly and the next 12 every 2 weeks.

2.1. Manometry

Anorectal manometry was performed with a device from Albyn medical, Palex, with 8 channels and a poly-isoprene balloon, which was 4.9 mm in diameter (Serial MS4 1401, Ross-Shire, Escocia). The transductor was placed across the anal canal into the rectum. Manometric measures included sphincter pressures at rest and during squeeze time and at different distances from the anal canal.

A low resting pressure of the anal canal was used as the baseline measure for relaxation and tonic activities of both internal anal sphincter (IAS) and external anal sphincter (EAS). Squeeze pressure was measured while asking the patient to contract the EAS. We determined the tonic activities during relaxation (resting) and contraction (squeeze) at 6, 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1 cm from the anal border to identify the sphincter. The values were measured in millimetres of mercury (mmHg). The same tests were repeated after 6 months of treatment.

2.2. Anal ultrasonography

A high-frequency panoramic ultrasound scan within the anal canal was performed using the Pro Focus, Ultrasound Scanner Class I, Type B. Ref: 2002 SN1880355, BK Medical, model. Herlev, Dinamarca.

2.3. Posterior tibial nerve stimulation (PTNS)

The PTNS was performed by surgeons who were members of the coloproctology unit at the General University Hospital of Elche and Reina Sofia Hospital of Murcia. The urgent PC 200 Neuromodulation System® (Uroplasty, Minnetonka, MN, USA) was used. Subjects underwent one 30 min session every week for 12 consecutive weeks. Afterwards, we compared the values before and after treatment and repeated the treatment for an additional 6 sessions every 2 weeks in all patients that had shown any clinical improvements after the first stage.

Subjects were placed in the supine position without anaesthesia. PTNS was delivered using a needle electrode that was inserted 3–4 cm cephalad and 2 cm posterior to the medial malleolus at a 60° angle towards the ankle joint to a depth of approximately 0.5–1 cm. Successful placement was confirmed by the presence of electric sensation 5 cm above and below the insertion site or a digital plantar flexion. PTNS was undertaken at the highest amplification (0–20 mA) at a frequency of 20 Hz causing neither a motor response nor pain.

2.4. Variables

Data from clinical anamnesis, the physical examination, incontinence diary, VAS and Wexner score were recorded at baseline and after 3 and 6 months. Anal manometry was realized at baseline and 6 months.

2.5. Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS® software v.17.0 (SPSS, Chicago, IL, USA). We used Student's *t*-test and ANOVA to compare paired variables (when following a Gaussian distribution) and Mann–Whitney and Kruskal Wallis tests for variables without a normal distribution. The chi-square test was used to compare discrete variables. Pearson's correlation test was used to compare quantitative variables. A P-value <0.05 was considered significant.

3. Results

Sixteen patients were analysed, 15 women and 1 men, with a mean age of 56.5 ± 10.9 years. The incontinence causes can be summarized in obstetric origin (50%) and secondary to perineal surgeries (50%). Faecal incontinence antecedents are described in Table 1.

The time between the initiation of the symptomatic incontinence and the moment of first medical visit before the first year was only 18.75% (3 patients) (Table 2). More than 60% (10 patients) have waited over 10 symptomatic years. Associated symptoms to faecal incontinence were sexual dysfunction in 4 patients (25%), urinary incontinence in 2 (12.5%) and perineal pain in 2 (12.5%).

At the beginning of the study, median values of visual analogical scale (VAS) were 6 (Range:0–8), and Wexner scale degree was 10 (Range: 3–19).

The defecator diary showed 50% of the patient with fewer than 3 episodes of faecal incontinence per week (mild), 43.8% with 3–7

Table 1
Faecal incontinence antecedents.

Diabetes mellitus	18.8%
Radicular pathology	18.8%
Arterial hypertension	18.8%
Haemorrhoidectomy	18.8%
Anal fistulae	25%
Anal fissure	31.3%
Pelvic surgery	42.1%
Episiotomy	35.5%
Multiparous	56.3%