Use of Reflux Medications in Premature Infants After Hospital Discharge

P. Brian Smith, MD, MPH, MHS

Medications are frequently used to treat gastroesophageal reflux (GER) in premature infants.¹⁻⁴ However, diagnostic modalities for GER are poor and clinical diagnosis is highly variable. Like all medications, GER medications have side effects specific to their drug class. In addition, a number of these medications have been associated with significant harm (eg, sepsis, necrotizing enterocolitis [NEC]) in large cohort studies.^{2,5-7}

In this issue of *Pediatrics*, D'Agostino et al use an electronic health record from 30 sites in Pennsylvania and New Jersey to document the use of GER medications in infants ≤ 35 weeks' gestation at birth born between January 2005 and January 2009.⁸ They find that 37% (812 of 2217) of the cohort was treated with GER medications in the first year of life. Strikingly, in $>75\%$ of cases, these medications were started after the initial presentation to the ambulatory setting. The length of exposure to these medications was prolonged: 375 days (interquartile range: 165–515) for infants started on therapy in the NICU and 294 days (interquartile range: 117–359) for those started on medications after NICU discharge.

Despite the frequent use of GER medications in premature infants, short- or long-term benefits of GER medications in this population are undocumented. Studies in premature infants have failed to show a correlation between apnea, bradycardia, or respiratory symptoms typically thought to be due to GER. In

a small, blinded, placebo-controlled, crossover trial of metoclopramide and ranitidine in premature infants, bradycardic episodes worsened with treatment.⁹ Two studies evaluating the efficacy of proton pump inhibitors in infants found no difference in efficacy between the study drug and placebo.¹⁰⁻¹²

Low gastric pH may be protective against development of infections and NEC in premature infants. Antacids significantly increase gastric pH, thus inhibiting the premature gut's natural defense against bacterial growth. Histamine-2 (H₂) receptor blocker–induced alterations to the fecal microbiota of premature infants lower microbial diversity and promote overgrowth of Proteobacteria.¹³ These alterations weaken the gastrointestinal tract's protective barrier and render very low birth weight (VLBW) infants, already predisposed to NEC and other infections, even more vulnerable. Use of H₂ receptor blocker medications, the most commonly used GER medications in premature infants,³ increased the risk of NEC in a cohort of 11 000 VLBW (<1500 g birth weight) infants (odds ratio = 1.71; 95% confidence interval 1.34–2.19).⁵ Infants receiving antacid therapy are also at increased risk of bacteremia, lower respiratory tract infections, aspiration pneumonia, and death.^{1,5,6,14} In a cohort of >127 000 VLBW infants from >300 NICUs, we observed a similar association between H₂ blocker therapy and the combined outcome of death, NEC, or sepsis.²

Duke University Medical Center, Durham, North Carolina

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Address correspondence to P. Brian Smith, MD, MPH, MHS, Duke Clinical Research Institute, PO Box 17969, Durham, NC 27715. E-mail: brian.smith@duke.edu

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GER medications were once widely used in premature infants hospitalized in the NICU.⁴ Dramatic inconsistency of treatment practices were observed among the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Neonatal Research Network NICUs; medical treatment of GER among extremely low birth weight (<1000 g birth weight) infants at discharge ranged from 2% to 90%.¹ Because of the lack of evidence of benefit and the increasing evidence of harm, quality improvement efforts

in NICUs have focused on reducing the use of these medications. These efforts to reduce H2 blocker exposure in the NICU have been successful, as evidenced by a decline in use from 23% in 2005 to 8% in 2012.^{2,15} However, the data from D'Agostino et al suggest that the majority of infant exposure to GER medications occurs after hospital discharge and, in fact, is often initiated in the outpatient setting.⁸

Pediatrics has a long history of widespread use of medications for

which the risks did not outweigh the benefits. All drugs should be shown to be both safe and effective before use. The study by D'Agostino has documented widespread, long-term use of medications that are likely neither.

ABBREVIATIONS

GER: gastroesophageal reflux

H2: histamine-2

NEC: necrotizing enterocolitis

VLBW: very low birth weight

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