Pharmacokinetics and Safety of Deferasirox in Subjects with Chronic Kidney Disease Undergoing Haemodialysis

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\textbf{Key words:} chronic kidney disease, ferritin, iron overload, chelation, deferasirox

\textbf{Word count (Introduction):} 483

\textbf{Word count (Discussion):} 605
Abstract

Treatment of chronic kidney disease (CKD) includes parenteral iron therapy, and these infusions can lead to iron overload. Secondary iron overload is typically treated with iron chelators, of which deferasirox is one of the most promising. However, it has not been studied in patients with CKD and iron overload. A pilot study was conducted to evaluate the pharmacokinetics and safety of deferasirox in 8 haemodialysis-dependent patients, who were receiving intravenous iron for treatment of anaemia of CKD. Deferasirox was administered at two doses (10 mg/kg and 15 mg/kg), either acute (once daily for two days) or steady-state (once daily for two weeks). A dose of 10 mg/kg in either protocol was not sufficient to achieve a plasma concentration in the therapeutic range (acute peak 14.1 and steady-state 22.8 µmol/l), while 15 mg/kg in either protocol maintained plasma concentration well above this range (acute peak 216 and steady-state 171 µmol/l). Plasma concentration observed at 15 mg/kg was well above that expected for this dose (40-50 µmol/l), although no adverse clinical events were observed. This study highlights the need to profile drugs such as deferasirox in specific patient groups, such as those with CKD and iron overload.
Introduction

Iron is an essential element in the body, forming the core of both haemoglobin and myoglobin. A healthy individual will have 4 - 5 g iron in their body, and the 1 - 2 mg lost per day is replenished by absorption from the duodenum. Iron levels are regulated, as iron can cause significant damage to cells through formation of peroxide radicals\(^1\). This can result in life-threatening damage to the heart, liver, brain, pancreas and joints\(^2\). Iron overload is caused by inherited disorders of metabolism or acquired from exogenous administration (e.g. iron administration or blood transfusion). The latter often occurs in the setting of haematological disorders with ineffective erythropoiesis.

Chronic kidney disease (CKD) is often associated with anaemia, due to deficient production of erythropoietin, and also reduced iron absorption and availability\(^3, 4\). This is partly due to increased production of hepcidin, the hormone that regulates iron absorption\(^5\). The treatment for anaemia consists of both parenteral iron supplements and erythropoiesis stimulating agents (ESA)\(^6-8\), although there is evidence of increased morbidity and mortality and many users become resistant to ESA\(^9\). Multiple infusions of iron are usually administered\(^10, 11\) and these can result in overload. Whilst serum iron studies, including ferritin levels, have been used to monitor iron toxicity and guide replacement, ferritin can be affected by factors such as inflammation and infection\(^1\). We have recently shown that serum studies are inadequate for guiding iron status in subjects with CKD\(^12\). Furthermore, 60% of haemodialysis subjects have hepatic iron concentration (HIC) greater than twice normal\(^13\).

Secondary iron overload disorders are usually treated with iron chelation agents. Deferasirox is the first oral iron-chelating drug approved for the reduction of chronic iron overload. It has a high, specific affinity for iron\(^14\), and is effective at multiple doses. In patients over 16 years old with β-thalassaemia and transfusional iron overload, a dose of 20 mg/kg/day will
maintain plasma levels within the therapeutic range of 15-20 µmol/l (trough) to 60-100 µmol/l (peak) over 24 hours\textsuperscript{15}. Deferasirox is metabolised through hepatic glucuronidation\textsuperscript{16}, which can vary greatly from patient to patient. In many countries, regulatory authorities have approved the use of deferasirox in patients with creatinine clearance > 40 ml/min, simply because of the lack of safety and pharmacokinetic data. Moreover, the manufacturer’s prescribing information warns against the use of deferasirox in patients with impaired renal function due to reported cases of acute renal failure.

There is a pressing need to evaluate efficacy and safety of potential therapies of iron overload complicating CKD. Access to accurate measurements of plasma deferasirox levels is limited\textsuperscript{18, 19}. The aims of this study were to (1) develop and validate a simple method for the analysis of deferasirox in human plasma, and (2) conduct a phase 1 safety study of the administration of deferasirox at 10 mg/kg and 15 mg/kg daily in stable subjects undergoing haemodialysis for CKD, with monitoring of side effects and plasma deferasirox levels.

**Methods**

**Study subjects and protocol**

An open label, single arm, phase I pilot study to evaluate the pharmacokinetics and safety of deferasirox at 2 dose levels of 10 mg/kg/day and 15 mg/kg/day was conducted in 8 haemodialysis-dependent patients, who were receiving intravenous iron and erythropoietin therapy for treatment of anaemia of CKD. Power analysis determined that with n = 4, we had 90% power to detect a difference of 15 µmol/l, where a = 0.05 and SD = 5, and 85% power to detect a difference of 35 µmol/l, where SD = 15.
Subjects were included if they were able to provide written informed consent, aged 18-80 years, and fulfilled the following criteria: CKD dependent on haemodialysis for at least 2 years; requirement for intravenous iron and erythropoietin therapy as per the current best practice protocol in use at Fremantle Hospital and Health Services; received a minimum of 4 g total intravenous iron in the 2 years before study entry; transferrin saturation >25%; haemoglobin ≥ 110 g/L for the 3 months preceding enrolment; normal or minimally abnormal cardiac function (NYHA Class 1, left ventricular ejection fraction ≥ 50% measured by echocardiography or nuclear medicine); expected life expectancy > 12 months; no significant comorbidity which would preclude deferasirox therapy; pre-menopausal female patients who were sexually active must use an effective method of contraception, or must have undergone clinically documented total hysterectomy, ovariectomy, or tubal ligation and have a negative pregnancy test.

Exclusion criteria included: significant comorbid conditions which in the opinion of the treating nephrologist would preclude inclusion in the study; homozygosity for C282Y mutation or compound heterozygosity for C282Y/H63D mutations in HFE gene; active gastrointestinal bleeding or other source of blood loss; alanine aminotransferase > 5 x upper limit of normal; patients with uncontrolled systemic hypertension; haemolysis or other haematological disorder which reduces haemoglobin level; past malignancy with potential to influence study outcome; pregnant or breast feeding; patients treated with systemic investigational drugs within the past 4 weeks or topical investigational drugs within the past 7 days; history of non-compliance, or unwilling to comply with the protocol; history of drug or alcohol abuse within the 12 months prior to dosing or evidence of such abuse as indicated by the laboratory assays conducted during the run-in period; patients with a known history of HIV; life expectancy of < 12 months.
Four subjects received a daily dose of deferasirox (Exjade) 10 mg/kg administered at 0800 starting on a pre-dialysis day (Day 1) with repeated sampling for pharmacokinetic studies over the next 48 hours covering the rest of the pre-dialysis day and the subsequent dialysis day. Blood was taken at time 0 (pre-dose), 2, 4, 6, 8, 24 (pre-dose), 26, 28, 30, 32 and 48 (pre-dose) hours for each patient. Each patient then received deferasirox 10 mg/kg/day for a further 2 weeks and had pharmacokinetic studies repeated over 48 hours (on Days 15 and 16), starting on a non-dialysis day and continuing over the subsequent dialysis day. During the 2-weeks steady-state study period, erythropoietin and iron were maintained unchanged, and dialysis treatment time for all patients was 270 minutes. The study protocol was then repeated on four different subjects who received a daily dose of deferasirox 15 mg/kg. The baseline characteristics of the study subjects are summarised in Table 1.

Deferasirox assay

LC-MS grade methanol (MeOH) and acetonitrile (ACN) were obtained from Honeywell Burdick and Jackson (Muskegon, USA). Formic acid was obtained from Sigma-Aldrich (St. Louis, USA). Milli-Q water was obtained from an in-lab Milli-Q system (Millipore Corp., Billerica, USA). Plasma samples were collected in sterile glass vials and stored at -80°C.

Deferasirox and $^{13}$C$_6$-deferasirox standards were obtained from Novartis (North Ryde, Australia) and Alsachim (Illkirch-Graffenstaden, France) respectively. Due to low solubility in water, standards were first dissolved in methanol and subsequently diluted into 95% water/5% acetonitrile with 1% formic acid, representing the initial HPLC mobile phase composition. Both labelled and unlabelled standards were analysed over the concentration range 0.1 to 1000 ng/ml.

Sample preparation was adapted from the method of Chauzit et al. $^{19}$ 100 µl of plasma was combined with 100 µl of internal standard solution and diluted 1:9 with dipotassium
phosphate buffer (0.1 M, pH 3). This solution was vortexed for 5 seconds to convert the iron chelate back to free drug. Acetonitrile was added (300 ml) and vortexed for 30 seconds to precipitate proteins. The solution was centrifuged at 13000 g and 20°C for 5 minutes and the supernatant was diluted 1:99 with 95% water/5% acetonitrile with 1% formic acid.

Samples were analysed on a Varian 212-LC with PAL autosampler. The column used was a Restek Ultra Aqueous C\textsubscript{18} (100 x 2.1 mm, 3 µm). The flow rate was 0.2 ml/min and the mobile phase consisted of: A: H\textsubscript{2}O + 1% formic acid; B: acetonitrile + 1% formic acid. The HPLC gradient was as follows (%A:B): 0 min – 95:5; 3 min – 95:5; 10 min – 0:100; 15 min – 0:100; 17 min – 95:5; 20 min – 95:5.

The HPLC was coupled to a Varian 325-MS triple quadrupole mass spectrometer with a vortex electrospray ionisation source (Agilent Technologies, USA). Drying gas was set at 300°C and 25 psi, nebulizing gas was set at 70 psi and vortex gas was set at 300°C and 30 psi. Capillary voltage was set to 140 V in positive ionisation mode and -84 V in negative mode; and CID gas (argon) pressure was 2 mTorr. Automated MS/MS breakdown was performed on each standard to determine the appropriate transitions for analysis. Six transitions, three in positive ion mode and three in negative, were identified for both labelled and unlabelled forms of the drug. For the unlabelled drug, the following transitions were used: positive \textit{m/z} 374 \rightarrow 108, 136 and 240; negative \textit{m/z} 372 \rightarrow 133, 252 and 328. For the labelled drug, the same transitions were used + \textit{m/z} 6.

The LC-MS/MS method was validated for the following parameters: selectivity, recovery, precision, linearity and sensitivity. Selectivity was determined by analysis of both spiked and drug-free plasma to determine the presence of any co-elution from matrix interference. Recovery was calculated by spiking deferasirox standard into plasma at the commencement and conclusion of sample preparation. Intra-day precision was determined by performing 5
replicate injections of deferasirox standard spiked into plasma (5, 50 and 500 ng/ml) and calculating a relative standard deviation (%RSD). This was performed over three consecutive days to assess inter-day precision. Linearity was determined by plotting a standard curve of peak area versus drug concentration over the 0.1 to 500 ng/ml. Sensitivity was determined as a limit of detection with a signal-to-noise ration not less than 3:1 and a limit of quantification with a ration of not less than 10:1.

Data analysis

LC-MS data was analysed using Varian Workstation v. 7 (Agilent Technologies, USA). Concentration values below the limit of quantification were set at zero. Non-compartmental pharmacokinetic analysis (Kinetica Version 5.0; Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham MA, USA) was used to determine the area under the plasma concentration-time curve (AUC$_{0-\infty}$), the area under the first moment-time curve (AUMC$_{0-\infty}$), mean residence time (MRT), apparent clearance at steady state (CL/F = Dose/AUC, where F is bioavailability), apparent volume of distribution at steady state (V$_{ss}$/F = CL × MRT) and the average plasma concentration at steady state (C$_{ss,av}$). Peak and trough plasma concentrations were determined from the concentration-time data.

Results

Deferasirox assay

Both deferasirox and $^{13}$C$_6$-deferasirox eluted from the column with a retention time of 8.9 minutes. Extraction of drug-free plasma showed no interference on any of the twelve MS/MS transitions used for labelled and unlabelled drug. Extraction recovery of deferasirox was 93%. Standard curves for both forms of the drug were linear over the range analysed ($r^2 =$
0.99 for both). The limit of detection for both forms of the drug was 0.1 ng/ml and the limit of quantification was 0.5 ng/ml. Overall the assay had an intra-day precision of 6.1% RSD, with the three concentrations having precision as follows: 5 ng/ml: 5.8%; 50 ng/ml: 9.2%; 500 ng/ml: 3.2%. The overall inter-day precision was 5.9% RSD, with the three concentrations as follows: 5 ng/ml: 4.3%; 50 ng/ml: 3.7%; 500 ng/ml: 9.8%.

**Patient data**

The baseline characteristics of the study subjects are summarised in Table 1, and there were no significant differences observed between the two patient groups for any of the parameters measured. Mean time on dialysis was substantially higher for patients receiving the 10 mg/kg dose (852 ± 128 days) than the 15 mg/kg dose (576 ± 234 days), although this was not statistically significant (p = 0.8).

There was no attrition, and all patients completed the full study. During the course of the study, there were no observed adverse clinical or biochemical test parameters on any of the study subjects at deferasirox doses of 10 mg/kg or 15 mg/kg daily (Table 2).

**Pharmacokinetic studies of deferasirox**

Pharmacokinetic data is summarised in Table 3. Mean plasma deferasirox concentrations for the 10 mg/kg study are shown in Figure 1. Both acute and steady-state treatments show the same trend pre- and post-dialysis. For the acute dose, deferasirox peaked at 8.1 (± 5.6) μmol/l and the trough was 3.2 (± 1.7) μmol/l. Post-dialysis, the peak and trough deferasirox concentrations were 4.1 (± 2.5) μmol/l and 4.1 (± 1.8) μmol/l respectively. The AUC$_{0-\infty}$ for the first dose (pre-dialysis) was 154 (± 163) μmol.h/l and the AUC$_{0-\infty}$ for the second dose (post-dialysis; adjusted for residual effects from the first dose) was 239 (± 147) μmol.h/l.
With a steady-state dose of 10 mg/kg/day, deferasirox peaked at 13.8 (± 9.2) μmol/l and dropped to 5.3 (± 2.4) μmol/l at 24 h. Post-dialysis, it peaked at 22.8 (± 4.5) μmol/l and at 48 h had dropped to 7.9 (± 3.9) μmol/l. The pre-dialysis AUC_{0-∞}, CL/F, V_{ss}/F and C_{ss,av} were 207 (± 168) μmol.h/l, 0.21 (± 0.15) l/h/kg, 2.0 (± 1.2) l/kg and 8.6 (± 7.0) μmol/l respectively. The post-dialysis AUC_{0-∞}, CL/F, V_{ss}/F and C_{ss,av} were 326 (± 190) μmol.h/l, 0.11 (± 0.06) l/h/kg, 0.9 (± 0.4) l/kg and 13.6 (± 7.9) μmol/l respectively.

Figure 2 shows mean plasma deferasirox concentrations for the 15 mg/kg study. Both acute and steady-state treatments show the same trend pre- and post-dialysis. For the acute dose, deferasirox peaked at 129.4 (± 62.0) μmol/l and the trough was 18.7 (± 14.0) μmol/l. Post-dialysis, the peak and trough deferasirox concentrations were 216.2 (± 56.2) μmol/l and 113.0 (± 80.9) μmol/l respectively. The AUC_{0-∞} for the first dose (pre-dialysis) was 1589 (± 1676) μmol.h/l and the AUC_{0-∞} for the second dose (post-dialysis; adjusted for residual effects from the first dose) was 4814 (± 4800) μmol.h/l.

With a steady-state dose of 15 mg/kg/day, deferasirox peaked at 165.3 (± 92.3) μmol/l and dropped to 73.1 (± 49.5) μmol/l at 24 h. Post-dialysis, it peaked at 170.8 (± 55.9) μmol/l and at 48 h had dropped to 87.6 (± 47.0) μmol/l. The pre-dialysis AUC_{0-∞}, CL/F, V_{ss}/F and C_{ss,av} were 2819 (± 3030) μmol.h/l, 0.03 (± 0.02) l/h/kg, 0.3 (± 0.2) l/kg and 117 (± 126) μmol/l respectively. The post-dialysis AUC_{0-∞}, CL/F, V_{ss}/F and C_{ss,av} were 2752 (± 2388) μmol.h/l, 0.02 (± 0.01) l/h/kg, 0.2 (± 0.1) l/kg and 115 (± 99) μmol/l respectively.

**Discussion**

This study has evaluated the pharmacokinetics and safety of deferasirox in 8 haemodialysis-dependent patients receiving intravenous iron for treatment of anaemia of CKD. It has also presented a new, simple and sensitive assay for deferasirox in plasma samples. Using this
method, retention times were stable, justifying the use of 1% formic acid in the mobile phase, rather than a more complicated buffer. By taking advantage of the increased sensitivity of modern LC-MS systems, samples can be diluted prior to analysis, greatly reducing the potential for matrix interference.

Nisbet-Brown et al. determined that for gap-free chelation coverage, plasma levels of deferasirox should be maintained between 15-20 (trough) and 60-100 µmol/l (peak), and used a dose of 20 mg/kg to achieve this in adult patients with β-thalassaemia. In this study, a dose of 10 mg/kg was insufficient to reach the suggested therapeutic concentrations with either acute or steady-state doses, although post-dialysis values for the steady-state doses were within this range. Doses of 15 mg/kg (both acute and steady-state) maintained levels within or above this range.

Plasma concentrations observed at a dose of 15 mg/kg, with either protocol, were much higher than previously observed in non-hemodialysis patients. Galanello et al. observed peak concentrations of 32.3 µmol/l with a single dose of 10 mg/kg and 64.3 µmol/l with a single dose of 20 mg/kg in patients with transfusion-dependent β-thalassemia. In contrast to the 10 mg/kg study, post-dialysis concentrations for the acute dose were higher than for the steady-state dose, which was unexpected. No clear clinical reason for this elevated concentration was observed, although much of this variation is due to one patient, who had levels approximately 3-fold higher than the other patients (peak 438 µmol/l). This highlights the need to evaluate drugs such as deferasirox in specific patient groups in which they are being considered, even when the primary method of drug clearance is not expected to be altered by underlying disease processes, such as those with CKD and iron overload.

There are no data pertaining to the ability of deferasirox to be dialysed, however the compound binds to albumin (40 g/L) at 98-99% efficiency for deferasirox concentrations
between 10 and 105 μg/mL. Deferasirox and its metabolites are primarily excreted in the faeces (84% of the dose), and renal excretion of deferasirox and its metabolites is minimal (8% of the dose). Thus, it is not anticipated that hemodialysis would significantly affect the clearance of the drug. Although pharmacokinetic data in patients without CKD would suggest minimal risk of accumulation of deferasirox owing to the minimal urinary excretion, the nearly 10-fold increase in AUC for deferasirox at a dose of 15 mg/kg compared to 10 mg/kg in our hemodialysis cohort suggests that uraemia may reduce faecal excretion or enhance intestinal reabsorption of deferasirox, thus resulting in higher than predicted plasma levels. In uremic rats, a decrease in intestinal protein membrane transporters such as P-glycoprotein (Pgp) and multidrug-resistance-related protein (MRP2) expression and function secondarily to serum uremic factors has been reported. This reduction could explain the increased bioavailability of drugs such as deferasirox, which is known to be excreted via MRP2, in renal failure.

This study has highlighted the need to profile drugs such as deferasirox in patients with chronic kidney disease and iron overload. The pharmacokinetics of deferasirox were different than expected in these patients, with a small dose incrementation from 10 to 15 mg/kg leading to a substantial increase in mean plasma concentration. While no adverse clinical parameters were observed in this study, it is clear that further research is needed to avoid potential adverse clinical outcomes and evaluate therapeutic efficacy for iron removal.

**Acknowledgements**

JKO is the recipient of a NHMRC Practitioner Fellowship.

This study was supported by an unrestricted grant from Novartis Pharmaceuticals Australia Pty. Ltd.
References


**Titles and legends**

Figure 1: Mean plasma concentration (±SD) of deferasirox following acute and steady-state doses of 10 mg/kg. Dialysis occurred at 24 hours. Acute dose represents a single dose at time 0. Steady-state doses were 10 mg/kg/day for 2 weeks prior to the study, with deferasirox plasma concentrations measured at day 14 and 15.

Figure 2: Mean plasma concentration (±SD) of deferasirox following acute and steady-state doses of 15 mg/kg. Dialysis occurred at 24 hours. Acute dose represents a single dose at time 0. Steady-state doses were 15 mg/kg/day for 2 weeks prior to the study, with deferasirox plasma concentrations measured at day 14 and 15.

Table 1: Baseline characteristics of the hemodialysis patients undergoing acute deferasirox pharmacokinetic studies.

Table 2: Safety characteristics of the 8 hemodialysis patients undergoing steady-state pharmacokinetic studies with 2 weeks of daily deferasirox.

Table 3: Non-compartmental pharmacokinetic data for deferasirox following steady-state (ss) doses of 10 and 15 mg/kg. AUC = area under the plasma concentration-time curve. CL/F = apparent clearance at steady state, where F is bioavailability. V_{ss}/F = apparent volume of distribution at steady state. C_{ss,av} = average plasma concentration at steady state.
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<tr>
<td>Age (yr)</td>
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<td>69 ± 5</td>
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<td>Gender (M/F)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Haemoglobin (g/l)</td>
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<td>Transferrin saturation (%)</td>
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<td>Time on dialysis (d)</td>
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## Table 2

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<td>Pre-dialysis</td>
<td>Post-dialysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>AUC_{ss} (µmol.h/l)</td>
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<td>CL/F (l/h/kg)</td>
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<td>V_{ss}/F (l/kg)</td>
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<td>C_{ss,av} (µmol/l)</td>
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<td>13.6 ± 7.9</td>
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Figure 1

[Graph showing Deferasirox plasma concentration (μmol/l) over time (hours).]
Figure 2