Dual Antagonism of PDGF and VEGF in Neovascular Age-Related Macular Degeneration

A Phase IIb, Multicenter, Randomized Controlled Trial

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Purpose: To assess the safety and efficacy of E10030 (Fovista; Ophthotech, New York, NY), a platelet-derived growth factor (PDGF) antagonist, administered in combination with the anti–vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) agent ranibizumab (Lucentis; Roche, Basel, Switzerland) compared with ranibizumab monotherapy in patients with neovascular age-related macular degeneration (nAMD).

Design: Phase IIb global, multicenter, randomized, prospective, double-masked, controlled superiority trial.

Participants: Four hundred forty-nine patients with treatment-naïve nAMD.

Methods: Participants were randomized in a 1:1:1 ratio to 1 of the following 3 intravitreal treatment groups: E10030 0.3 mg in combination with ranibizumab 0.5 mg, E10030 1.5 mg in combination with ranibizumab 0.5 mg, and sham in combination with ranibizumab 0.5 mg (anti-VEGF monotherapy). Drugs were administered monthly in each of the groups for a total duration of 24 weeks.

Main Outcome Measures: The prespecified primary end point was the mean change in visual acuity (VA; Early Treatment Diabetic Retinopathy [ETDRS] letters) from baseline to 24 weeks.

Results: No significant safety issues were observed in any treatment group. The E10030 (1.5 mg) combination therapy regimen met the prespecified primary end point of superiority in mean VA gain compared with anti-VEGF monotherapy (10.6 compared with 6.5 ETDRS letters at week 24; P = 0.019). A dose-response relationship was evident at each measured time point commencing at 4 weeks. Visual acuity outcomes favored the E10030 1.5 mg combination therapy group regardless of baseline VA, lesion size, or central subfield thickness on optical coherence tomography. All clinically relevant treatment end points of visual benefit (≥15 ETDRS letter gain, final VA ≥20/40 or ≥20/25) and visual loss (≥1 ETDRS line loss, ≥2 ETDRS line loss, final VA ≤20/125 or ≤20/200) favored the E10030 1.5 mg combination group.

Conclusions: In this phase IIb clinical trial, a 62% relative benefit from baseline was noted in the E10030 1.5 mg combination therapy group compared with the anti-VEGF monotherapy group. A favorable safety and efficacy profile of E10030 combination therapy for nAMD was evident across multiple clinically relevant end points. This highly powered study provides strong rationale for a confirmatory phase III clinical trial. Ophthalmology 2016;:

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This experience over the past decade highlights the limitations of anti-VEGF agents and the unmet need for more effective therapies. Many studies indicate that pericytes play an important role in the limitations of anti-VEGF therapy, in both the short and long term.\textsuperscript{18–24} Pericytes share a common basement membrane with endothelial cells, intimately coating them.\textsuperscript{25} Pericytes provide endothelial cells with VEGF and other growth and cell survival factors by paracrine and/or juxtacrine signaling mechanisms.\textsuperscript{26} Consequently, the neovascular endothelial cells are protected in the setting of anti-VEGF therapy.

Pericyte recruitment, maturation, and survival are mediated by platelet-derived growth factor (PDGF).\textsuperscript{27} E10030 (Fovista; Ophthotech, New York, NY) is a 32-mer pegylated DNA aptamer that selectively binds to PDGF-BB and PDGF-AB homodimers and heterodimers, respectively, thereby disrupting the interaction with their cognate tyrosine kinase receptors (PDGF-BB with PDGFR-\(\alpha\alpha\), PDGFR-\(\alpha\bb\), and PDGFR-\(\beta\bb\); PDGF-AB with PDGFR-\(\alpha\alpha\) and PDGFR-\(\beta\bb\)). These receptors are commonly expressed on cells of mesenchymal origin, such as pericytes.\textsuperscript{5,24,27–29} In a preclinical model, E10030 potently stripped neovascular pericytes from the underlying endothelial cells.\textsuperscript{30} Pericyte stripping from a neovascular complex may leave the underlying endothelial cells in an unprotected and vulnerable state, thereby increasing their sensitivity to the effects of VEGF blockade.

Dual targeting of PDGF and VEGF in nAMD has been assessed in a phase I clinical trial of E10030 administered in combination with ranibizumab (Lucentis); this therapy had a favorable safety profile, produced improved VA when compared with baseline, and caused biomarker changes supporting the enhanced efficacy.\textsuperscript{32} In this article, we describe the results of a subsequent phase Ib randomized, prospective clinical trial of treatment-naïve nAMD eyes, comparing E10030 in combination with anti-VEGF therapy versus anti-VEGF monotherapy. To the best of our knowledge, this clinical trial represents the largest phase Ib pharmacologic superiority study conducted to date for a retinal disorder.

Methods

Study Design

This global phase Ib clinical trial (www.clinicaltrials.gov identifier, NCT01089517) used a parallel-group, randomized, double-masked, prospective superiority design to establish the safety and efficacy of intravitreal E10030 administered in combination with an anti-VEGF agent in patients with nAMD. The study was conducted at 69 study sites in 9 countries (in North and South America, Europe, and Israel) between April 2010 and January 2012. A list of study sites and investigators can be found in Appendix 1 (available at www.aaojournal.org). The appropriate ethics committees or institutional review boards at each study center approved the protocol. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. All data were collected in a Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act–compliant manner.

Study Population Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility criteria included age 50 years or older, study eye with treatment-naïve subfoveal choroidal neovascularization (CNV), a classic component on fluorescein angiography (FA), and total neovascular lesion area (including blood, neovascularization, and scar or atrophy) of 5 disc areas (DAs) or less, of which at least 50% was active. Other inclusion criteria included best-corrected ETDRS VA between 20/63 and 20/200 Snellen equivalent in the study eye and the presence of subretinal fluid, intraretinal fluid, subretinal pigment epithelium (RPE) fluid, or a combination thereof on optical coherence tomography (OCT). VA inclusion cutoff at 20/63 Snellen equivalent (instead of 20/40 Snellen equivalent) was selected to minimize the potential influence of a ceiling effect that could confound the mathematical inference(s) in a superiority trial design.

Key ocular exclusion criteria included prior treatment for nAMD in the study eye, prior intravitreal drug exposure regardless of indication (including corticosteroids), subretinal hemorrhage more than 50% of the total lesion size, and RPE tears. Patients with diabetes were excluded. Eligibility was confirmed by masked assessment of FA and OCT images by a centralized and independent image reading center (Duke Reading Center). A comprehensive list of inclusion and exclusion criteria can be found in Appendix 2 (available at www.aaojournal.org).

Sample Size, Treatment Groups, and Masking

Patients were randomized centrally in a 1:1:1 ratio to one of the following treatment groups: 0.3 mg E10030 in combination with 0.5 mg ranibizumab, 1.5 mg E10030 in combination with 0.5 mg ranibizumab, and sham in combination with 0.5 mg ranibizumab. The study planned for the enrollment of at least 148 patients (to account for patient dropout) in each of these groups, for a total of approximately 444 patients. Patients were treated monthly with intravitreal injection, according to their assigned dose group, at day 0 and weeks 4, 8, 12, 16, and 20 (6 doses). Patients were masked to treatments. One investigator performed the study drug or sham injection. A separate masked investigator supervised masked assessment of efficacy and assessed adverse events (AEs).

Drug Administration Procedure

Intravitreal injections were performed in accordance with standard-of-care techniques that included the use of 5% povidone iodine and a sterile lid speculum. Intraocular pressure (IOP) was measured 30 minutes after the first injection (ranibizumab, 0.5 mg/eye, 50 \(\mu\)l) to detect delayed normalization of IOP in any patient subgroup. The IOP was monitored after the second injection until it was less than 30 mmHg.

Schedule of Visits and Assessments

Efficacy and safety were assessed at study visits on day 0 and weeks 4, 8, 12, 16, 20, and 24; there was a \(\pm3\)-day visit window centered on the week 4 time point and a \(\pm7\)-day visit window centered on the subsequent time points. Certified masked examiners performed protocol refraction and ETDRS VA testing at each study visit to assess best-corrected VA at 4 m. At each study visit, participants underwent assessment of vital signs, IOP testing, and examination of the anterior and posterior segments. In addition, OCT was performed at screening and weeks 4, 8, 12, and 24. Fluorescein angiography was performed at screening and weeks 4, 12, and 24. Image acquisition and assessment parameters for OCT, fundus photographs, and FA can be found in Appendix 3 (available at www.aaojournal.org). Laboratory tests included hematologic analysis, renal function analysis, hepatic function analysis, electrolyte concentrations, and urinalysis; a complete list of
laboratory tests can be found in Appendix 4 (available at www.aaojournal.org).

**End Points and Statistical Analysis**

The prespecified primary efficacy end point was the mean change in VA at week 24 when compared with baseline for participants treated with the combinations of E10030 and ranibizumab 0.5 mg versus those receiving ranibizumab 0.5 mg monotherapy. Patients were allocated centrally to 1 of 3 treatment groups. Secondary VA end points included the mean change in VA at week 12 and the proportion of participants gaining 15 ETDRS letters (3 ETDRS lines) or more from baseline at weeks 12 and 24. Secondary anatomic end points included the mean change in CNV area as determined by FA. Additional supportive VA end points included the proportion of participants who gained or lost significant VA based on a change in the number of ETDRS lines read.

The Duke Reading Center independently analyzed and graded FA and OCT images in a masked fashion. The OCT anatomic parameters identified before the study onset for analysis, with respect to their presence or absence at baseline and at 24 weeks, included RPE atrophy, intraretinal and subretinal fluid relative to the foveal location, as well as subretinal hyperreflective material (SHRM). On OCT, RPE atrophy was defined by loss of RPE, loss of overlying outer retinal neurosensory retinal layer, and signal penetration into the choroid. Subretinal hyperreflective material was identified on OCT scans and was defined as hyperreflective material external to the photoreceptors and internal to the RPE.33

A retrospective masked analysis also was conducted to assess the development and progression of subretinal fibrosis. Color fundus photographic standards depicting 5 progressive grades of subretinal fibrosis in nAMD from 0 to 4 (absent, barely visible, mild, moderate, or severe) were developed by Usha Chakravarthy at the Belfast Reading Center. This reading center evaluated the amount of subretinal fibrosis by masked analysis of color fundus photographs for all participants experiencing visual loss. Fibrosis development or progression was defined as a 2-step progression on this scale. Safety end points included AEs, vital signs, laboratory variables, and ophthalmic variables including VA, IOP, ophthalmic examination findings, and FA and OCT findings. According to the statistical analysis plan, the Hochberg procedure was used to address multiplicity. In addition, intention-to-treat last observation carried forward methodology was prespecified to account for missing values, and descriptive statistics were used for secondary and supportive analysis. The safety analysis included all patients who had at least 1 administration of the trial drug.

**Results**

**Patient Disposition and Baseline Characteristics**

A total of 449 patients with treatment-naïve nAMD were randomized to each of the treatment groups as follows: 1.5 mg E10030 combination therapy (n = 152), 0.3 mg E10030 combination therapy (n = 149), and anti-VEGF monotherapy (n = 148). Of these 449 patients, 14 withdrew before completion. There were 4 withdrawals in the anti-VEGF monotherapy group (2.7%) and 5 withdrawals in each of the E10030 combination therapy groups (3.3% overall). As summarized in Figure 1, the most common reason for withdrawal was participant request (8 participants), followed by AEs (3 participants), investigator decision (1 participant), sponsor decision (1 participant), and being lost to follow-up (1 participant). Baseline demographic features were balanced between treatment groups (Table 1). Most patients were women and were white. The mean participant age was 78 years, and the mean baseline VA was 50 ETDRS letters.

**Primary End Point Analysis**

The 1.5 mg E10030 combination therapy group met the prespecified superiority primary end point of mean change in VA from baseline to 24 weeks compared with anti-VEGF monotherapy (Fig 2). At 24 weeks, participants receiving 1.5 mg E10030 combination therapy had a statistically significant improvement in mean VA (10.6 ETDRS letters) compared with those participants receiving anti-VEGF monotherapy (6.5 ETDRS letters; \( P = 0.019 \)). Participants receiving 0.3 mg E10030 combination therapy gained a mean of 8.8 ETDRS letters at week 24, consistent with a trend in VA improvement (\( P = 0.17 \)).
Other Key Visual Acuity End Points

At week 12, participants receiving 1.5 mg E10030 combination therapy had an increase in mean VA of 8.7 ETDRS letters, whereas participants treated with anti-VEGF monotherapy had a mean increase of 5.1 ETDRS letters ($P = 0.016$). A dose-response relationship was evident at each measured time point commencing at 4 weeks. Relative to the anti-VEGF monotherapy group, the VA benefit favoring the 1.5 mg E10030 combination therapy patients increased in magnitude over time (Fig 3). In addition, a larger percentage of participants receiving 1.5 mg E10030 combination therapy had 3 lines or more of improvement at weeks 12 and 24 (32% and 39%, respectively) compared with those receiving anti-VEGF monotherapy (22% and 34%, respectively). Visual acuity outcomes favored the 1.5 mg E10030 combination therapy group regardless of baseline VA, lesion size, or central subfield thickness on OCT (Fig 4).

Multiple clinically relevant treatment end points of visual gain and loss favored the 1.5 mg E10030 combination therapy group compared with anti-VEGF monotherapy group (Fig 5). At 24 weeks, the proportion of participants treated with 1.5 mg E10030 combination therapy were both more likely to experience a marked amount of VA gain (>4 and >5 ETDRS lines) and to achieve improved final VA ($\geq 20/40$ and $\geq 20/25$) compared with participants receiving anti-VEGF monotherapy. At 24 weeks, the proportion of participants treated with 1.5 mg E10030 combination therapy were less likely both to lose VA ($\geq 1$ and $\geq 2$ ETDRS lines) and to have a lower final VA score ($20/125$ or worse and $20/200$ or worse) compared with participants treated with anti-VEGF monotherapy.

Table 1. Baseline Demographics

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<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Sham plus Ranibizumab (n = 148)</th>
<th>0.3 mg E10030 plus Ranibizumab (n = 149)</th>
<th>1.5 mg E10030 plus Ranibizumab (n = 152)</th>
<th>Total E10030 (0.3 mg + 1.5 mg; n = 301)</th>
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<td>145 (97.3)</td>
<td>149 (98.0)</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td>56 (37.6)</td>
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<td>55.4—94.1</td>
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<td>Active</td>
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<td>17 (11.3)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>70 (47.0)</td>
<td>77 (50.7)</td>
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<td>79 (53.0)</td>
<td>75 (49.3)</td>
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<td>Total lesion size (disc areas)</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Data are number of patients (%) unless otherwise indicated.

*Age at randomization, intent-to-treat population.

Figure 2. Bar graph showing the primary efficacy end point, mean change in visual acuity (VA) from baseline at 24 weeks. There was a statistically significant difference between the 1.5 mg E10030 plus ranibizumab arm and the sham plus ranibizumab arm (10.6 compared with 6.5 Early Treatment Diabetic Retinopathy [ETDRS] letters at week 24; $P = 0.019$), representing a 62% additional benefit from baseline. Data from the intention-to-treat analysis is depicted. The last observation carried forward method was used to handle missing data. Error bars represent standard error.
Key Anatomic End Points

Mean CNV area decreased among all treatment groups at week 24 compared with baseline. The mean reductions in CNV area between the study arms when evaluated as a full cohort in each treatment group was \(-0.7\) DA for anti-VEGF monotherapy, \(-0.7\) DA for 0.3 mg E10030 combination therapy, and \(-0.6\) DA for 1.5 mg E10030 combination therapy.

Smaller than mean area (\(\leq 1.62\) DAs) and larger than mean area (\(>1.62\) DAs) CNV at baseline were analyzed retrospectively to allow for a more arithmetically optimized investigation of CNV regression. This supportive analysis showed a greater benefit among baseline lesion size, baseline fluid (central subfield thickness on optical coherence tomography), or baseline vision. VA = visual acuity.

Figure 3. Graph showing the mean change in visual acuity (VA) from baseline over time. There was a benefit of E10030 plus ranibizumab treatment over sham plus ranibizumab treatment in terms of mean VA gain from week 4 onward for both dose levels. A dose-response relationship was evident at each time point for the 1.5 mg E10030 plus ranibizumab and the 0.3 mg E10030 plus ranibizumab treatment arms. The benefit expanded over time. Data from the intent-to-treat analysis are depicted. The last observation carried forward method was used to handle missing data. Error bars represent standard error.

Figure 4. Bar graphs showing baseline variables and visual outcomes at 24 weeks. Visual outcomes favored the higher-dose E10030 combination therapy group regardless of baseline lesion size, baseline fluid (central subfield thickness on optical coherence tomography), or baseline vision. VA = visual acuity.
decrease in CNV area in the E10030 combination therapy arms for both small CNV at baseline ($\leq 0.15$ and $\leq 0.12$ DA for the 0.3 mg and 1.5 mg E10030 combination arms, respectively, compared with $\leq 0.06$ DA for the anti-VEGF monotherapy arm) and for large CNV at baseline ($\leq 1.69$ and $\leq 1.73$ DAs for the 0.3 mg and 1.5 mg E10030 combination therapy arms, respectively, compared with $\leq 1.59$ DAs for the anti-VEGF monotherapy arm).

Additional ad hoc supportive analyses were performed to assess change in CNV area for eyes gaining more than 3 lines (15 ETDRS letters) of VA at week 24. This analysis showed a greater relative decrease in CNV area for eyes in the E10030 combination therapy arms compared with the anti-VEGF monotherapy arm (Fig 6A). The decrease in CNV area was particularly evident for eyes with large CNV at baseline: $\leq 1.48$ and $\leq 2.33$ DAs for the 0.3 mg and 1.5 mg E10030 combination therapy arms, respectively, compared with $\leq 0.24$ DA for the anti-VEGF monotherapy arm.

Changes in total macular volume, intraretinal fluid, subretinal fluid, and sub-RPE fluid were determined to evaluate alterations in vascular permeability in each treatment group. There were no significant differences in these parameters among the treatment groups (Fig 7).

A greater proportion of eyes treated with 1.5 mg E10030 combination therapy had complete resolution of SHRM from baseline when compared with eyes treated with anti-VEGF monotherapy (SHRM was absent in 32% vs. 22%, respectively). In participants who achieved significant visual gain (at week 24), an even greater proportion of eyes treated with 1.5 mg E10030 combination therapy had resolution of SHRM from baseline compared with eyes treated with anti-VEGF monotherapy (SHRM was absent in 54% vs. 38%, respectively; Fig 6B).

A retrospective masked analysis also was conducted with respect to the development and progression of subretinal fibrosis. In those eyes with VA loss at 24 weeks, the mean change in subretinal fibrosis severity from baseline to 24 weeks was less in the 1.5 mg E10030 combination therapy group compared with the anti-VEGF monotherapy group (0.97 vs. 2.0; $P = 0.003$). In this subgroup at 24 weeks, a greater percentage of eyes receiving anti-VEGF monotherapy demonstrated subretinal fibrosis and had subretinal fibrosis progression (51% and 54%, respectively) compared with those
Subretinal hyperreflective material (SHRM) was prominent subfoveally (lower left panel), which resolved at 24 weeks (lower right panel). A representative 1.5 mg E10030 plus ranibizumab case is shown in the bottom panels. In the baseline image, note the 1.5-DA classic subfoveal CNV with some blockage from mild subretinal hemorrhage nasally (lower left panel). The decrease in area of CNV was 0.24 DA for the sham plus ranibizumab arm compared with 0.01 DA for the 1.5 mg E10030 plus ranibizumab arm compared with −0.24 DA for the sham plus ranibizumab arm in the large CNV (upper right panel). A representative 1.5 mg E10030 plus ranibizumab case is shown in the bottom panels. In the baseline image, note the 1.5-DA classic subfoveal CNV with some blockage from mild subretinal hemorrhage nasally (lower left panel), which decreased in size at 24 weeks (lower right panel).

Figure 6. Anatomic changes associated with more than 3-line gains at 24 weeks. A, Change in choroidal neovascularization (CNV) size. A retrospective supportive analysis was performed to assess change in CNV size for patients with smaller than mean area (<1.62 disc areas [DAs]) or larger than mean area (>1.62 DAs) CNV at baseline. In those patients gaining more than 3 lines (15 Early Treatment Diabetic Retinopathy [ETDRS] letters) of visual acuity (VA) at week 24, the decrease in area of CNV was −0.1 DA for the 1.5 mg E10030 plus ranibizumab arm compared with −0.01 DA for the sham plus ranibizumab arm in the small CNV (upper left panel). The decrease in area of CNV was −2.33 DAs for the 1.5 mg E10030 plus ranibizumab arm compared with −0.24 DA for the sham plus ranibizumab arm in the large CNV (upper right panel). A representative 1.5 mg E10030 plus ranibizumab case is shown in the bottom panels. In the baseline image, note the 1.5-DA classic subfoveal CNV with some blockage from mild subretinal hemorrhage nasally (lower left panel), which decreased in size at 24 weeks (lower right panel). B, Anatomic changes: absence of subretinal hyperreflective material (SHRM). Retrospective analysis of optical coherence tomography findings was performed in those patients gaining more than 3 lines (15 ETDRS letters) of VA at week 24. Subretinal hyperreflective material was absent in 54% of those patients in the 1.5 mg E10030 plus ranibizumab arm compared with 38% in the sham plus ranibizumab arm (upper panels). A representative 1.5 mg E10030 plus ranibizumab case is shown in the bottom panels. In the baseline image, note the prominent SHRM subfoveally (lower left panel), which resolved at 24 weeks (lower right panel).

Receiving 1.5 mg E10030 combination therapy (10% and 27%, respectively).

Retinal pigment epithelium atrophy (RPE loss or disruption with overlying photoreceptor atrophy and signal penetration into the choroid) also was assessed by OCT in a prespecified masked fashion by the Duke Reading Center. At 24 weeks, RPE atrophy was evident in 21% of eyes in the anti-VEGF monotherapy group (n = 30/144), 17% in the 0.3 mg E10030 combination therapy group (n = 24/143), and 16% in the 1.5 mg E10030 combination therapy group (n = 23/145), respectively (Fig 8).

Safety

E10030 plus ranibizumab combination therapy was well tolerated. There were no significant differences in injection procedure AEs, study drug AEs, AEs leading to study discontinuation, or serious AEs among the treatment arms. Very few patients experienced study drug AEs, and most AEs were mild or moderate in intensity.

The most frequently reported AEs were ophthalmic AEs in the study eye related to the injection itself, such as surface irritation and subconjunctival hemorrhage. Transient elevation of mean IOP, consistent with a volume effect, was observed, and mean IOP returned to the preinjection IOP level in all arms at the next visit and at the end of the study. There were no AEs of glaucoma.

Nonophthalmic AEs were reported less frequently than ophthalmic AEs. The most frequently occurring systemic AEs were conditions that commonly occur among the general population, including hypertension, headache, nasopharyngitis, and urinary tract infection. There were no clinically meaningful laboratory abnormality trends and no significant vital sign changes.

The incidence of severe AEs in the combination and mono-therapy groups was similar and is summarized in Table 2. There was a low incidence of Antithrombotic Trialists’ Collaboration events and no imbalance among groups. There were no events of endophthalmitis, retinal detachment, retinal tear, or iatrogenic traumatic cataract after a total of 4431 intravitreal injections (1776 injections of E10030 and 2655 injections of ranibizumab).

Discussion

This clinical trial confirmed the initial findings of the phase I clinical trial, which suggested a favorable safety profile, improved visual outcomes, and biomarker changes consistent with the mechanism of action of E10030 combination therapy in nAMD. This phase IIb study demonstrated a statistically significant VA benefit when E10030 (1.5 mg) was added to a monthly anti-VEGF regimen (E10030 combination therapy) over 6 months for nAMD, reflected by the 62% additive improvement in mean change in VA from baseline to 24 weeks. A dose-dependent benefit of E10030 combination therapy over anti-VEGF monotherapy was evident early and was sustained to the last measured time point at 24 weeks. Moreover, there was a suggestion of increasing benefit of E10030 combination therapy compared with anti-VEGF monotherapy over time, with no drug-related safety imbalances between the groups. The relative treatment benefit in the E10030 combination therapy arm was evident regardless of baseline VA, lesion size, or central...
subfield thickness on OCT and was evident across multiple clinically relevant treatment end points measuring VA gain and reduction of VA loss.

Multiple mechanisms involving dual antagonism of VEGF and PDGF signaling pathways may result in a variety of disease-modifying tissue responses (i.e., neovascular complex regression; reduction of fibrovascular scar and/or fibrous scar). First, in preclinical pathologic angiogenesis, when PDGF signaling is disrupted, pericytes are stripped from neovascular endothelial cells. The resulting endothelial-lined neovascular tubes are highly vulnerable to the effects of anti-VEGF therapy, thereby inducing neovascular regression. Second, immunolabeling experiment studies of spatiotemporal cellular events in laser CNV models suggest that pericytes play a key role during the initial formation and growth of CNV. Third, recent findings show that pericytes play an important role in local inflammatory response by orchestrating the navigation of leukocytes within the interstitial space to sites of inflammation. Pericytes coordinate this interstitial leukocyte trafficking through expression of the cell-surface intercellular adhesion molecule-1 (allowing pericytes physically to engage neutrophils and monocytes or macrophages) and by releasing the chemotactic macrophage migration-inhibitory factor. Fourth, PDGF itself is chemotactic for pericytes, RPE cells, and glial cells, all of which are known components of surgically extracted fibrovascular and fibrous CNV. Finally, there is strong supporting evidence that pericytes are a major source of myofibroblasts, which deposit pathologic matrix. Platelet-derived growth factor also is central to wound healing and fibrosis systemically, as manifested by the US Food and Drug Administration approval of a recombinant PDGF dermatologic gel to promote the healing of diabetic ulcers, as well as the recent US Food and Drug Administration approval of nintedanib for idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, which is known to involve PDGF signaling.
E10030-mediated PDGF inhibition significantly reduced epiretinal fibrosis in an animal model of retinal scarring.\(^4^0\) In the present study, we targeted these multiple mechanisms with E10030 plus anti-VEGF combination therapy. We propose that dual PDGF and VEGF inhibition induced neovascular regression after stripping of pericytes. We further believe that PDGF inhibited nonovascular components (myofibroblasts and inflammatory, RPE, and glial cells)\(^1^\) to limit the amount of fibrovascular and fibrous tissues in these eyes with nAMD. Based on these data taken together, we hypothesize that these beneficial effects on tissue responses accounted for the improved VA observed in this study with E10030 plus anti-VEGF combination therapy.

The imaging studies supported the aforementioned proposed mechanisms of action for E10030 plus anti-VEGF combination therapy on tissue responses and VA. Neovascular complex regression after treatment with E10030 combination therapy was evident on OCT based on the enhanced resolution of SHRM, which also correlated with improved VA. On FA, a similar CNV regression effect was suggested by the separate evaluation of small and large CNV lesions at baseline. This division was used to address the confounding effect resulting from the disproportional size related to this finding is relevant because nAMD-associated fibrosis is a key cause of decreased VA in anti-VEGF-treated eyes.\(^3^3,^4^2\) In this trial, approximately half of the eyes that did not gain VA while receiving anti-VEGF monotherapy demonstrated subretinal fibrosis. In the Comparison of Age-Related Macular Degeneration Treatments Trials, approximately 25% of eyes demonstrated fibrosis by 2 years despite treatment with anti-VEGF monotherapy.\(^4^2\)

One Comparison of Age-Related Macular Degeneration Treatments Trials publication showed SHRM as a significant risk factor for scar formation.\(^4^2\) The authors of that publication postulated that E10030-mediated PDGF inhibition and associated SHRM resolution may be one explanation for the resulting visual benefit noted in this study, which requires confirmation in future clinical trials.\(^4^2\)

In summary, E10030 combination therapy yielded robust visual outcomes across multiple meaningful parameters consistent with the mechanism of action. The overall trend in imaging biomarker responses were consistent with visual benefit associated with E10030 combination therapy. To the best of our knowledge, in the current anti-VEGF monotherapy era, no biomarker has been correlated with improved visual outcome after the initial resolution of exudation in the induction phase. Large, confirmatory, phase III clinical trials in nAMD are underway, comparing 1.5 mg E10030 combined with each of the 3 commonly used anti-VEGF agents (ranibizumab, aflibercept, and off-label bevacizumab) with the respective anti-VEGF agent administered as monotherapy.

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Footnotes and Financial Disclosures

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Abbreviations and Acronyms:
AE = adverse event; CVN = choroidal neovascularization; DA = disc area; ETDRS = Early Treatment Diabetic Retinopathy Study; FA = fluorescein angiography; IOP = intraocular pressure; nAMD = neovascular age-related macular degeneration; OCT = optical coherence tomography; PDGF = platelet-derived growth factor; RPE = retinal pigment epithelium; SHRM = subretinal hyperreflective material; VA = visual acuity; VEGF = vascular endothelial growth factor.

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