The Food and Drug Administration’s Recent Action on April 23, 2014 Failed to Appropriately Address Safety Concerns about Epidural Steroid Use

To the Editor:

As patient safety advocates, we are thankful for the oversight of the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in our health care system. Unfortunately, it is our belief that recent actions of the FDA were incorrect and could adversely impact thousands of Americans who suffer from chronic pain. This is increasingly troubling in a period of time when we seek treatment methods that can reduce the need for addictive and often dangerous medication choices. On April 23, 2014 the FDA warned that the injection of corticosteroids into the epidural space of the spine “may result in rare but serious adverse events, including loss of vision, stroke, paralysis and death” (1). Furthermore, they required the addition of a warning to the drug labels of injectable corticosteroids to describe these risks. They further state that the “effectiveness and safety of the drugs for this use have not been established, and the FDA has not approved corticosteroids for such use” (1). While the FDA has not approved the use of epidural steroids to manage spinal pain conditions, these injections have been used to treat radicular type pain since at least 1960 and have been safely administered to millions of patients worldwide (2).

We believe that the FDA has misspoken with this warning, to the detriment of clinicians and patients alike. Their document contains 17 references supporting their stance. Of these 17 references, 11 are exclusively concerned with the administration of steroids using a transforaminal approach to the spine, which is decidedly distinct and separate from a classic interlaminar administration of these drugs (3). In fact, none of the remaining 6 references deals with complications associated with lumbar interlaminar epidural steroid injections at all, which is why the message being conveyed by that organization will lead to confusion and dissemination of misinformation between and among clinicians and patients. The FDA does not rely upon evidence-based medicine in formulating this warning, but instead has used isolated case reports, which does not amount to a critical appraisal of evidence either for efficacy of these techniques, or for potential complications. The scientific-minded must ask if it is appropriate that the FDA demand rigorous, peer-reviewed and evidenced-based studies in making its own determinations as to the appropriateness of any given therapeutic modality, while they rely upon documentation that could not possibly withstand their own scrutiny if used in support of a given treatment modality.

Finally, the FDA’s use of reference #17 is the most interesting, since that is a review article that states, “The data are reassuring and suggest that central neuraxial (i.e., epidural and spinal) block has a low incidence of major complications, many of which resolve within 6 months” (4).

While we concur with the FDA in providing warnings regarding transforaminal neuraxial steroid injections, particularly in the cervical spine, the same risks (spinal infarction, paralysis, death) are very rarely associated with lumbar interlaminar injections, and lumping all corticosteroid injections into the same category is not appropriate and is technically incorrect. Transforaminal injections of corticosteroids are not synonymous with interlaminar epidural steroid injections (Fig. 1). Additional unique risks of the transforaminal approach include an increased risk of intradiscal injection (5). The FDA did not distinguish the use of various modalities such as nonparticulate steroids used for transforaminal injections versus particulate steroids. Based on the data, this is unwise if attempting to give a useful safety guide to interested parties. In point of fact, there is no case report in the medical literature of paralysis or death due to spinal infarction that has been unequivocally associated with the use of these nonparticulates.

The FDA should amend its language to reflect the proper use of its own references, or prepare a new statement that factually outlines the risks and differ-
**Fig. 1.** Comparison of the needle entry points for parasagittal interlaminar approach (PIL) versus the transforaminal approach (TF) taken from Candido KD, et al. Anesth Analg 2008;106:638-644.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>References used in the FDA letter</th>
<th>Type of Article</th>
<th>Number of Patients</th>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Type of Steroids</th>
<th>Imaging guidance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Rathmell JP. Toward improving the safety of transforaminal injection. Anesth Analg 2009;109:8-10</td>
<td>Editorial</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Transforaminal</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Kennedy DJ, Dreyfuss P, Aprill CN, Bogduk N. Paraplegia following image-guided transforaminal lumbar spine epidural steroid injection: two case reports. Pain Med 2009;10:1389-94.</td>
<td>Case Reports</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Lumbar Transforaminal</td>
<td>6 mg betamethasone + 1 ml 0.75% bupivacaine + 160 mg methylprednisolone + 6 ml 0.375% bupivacaine</td>
<td>Fluoroscopy CT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Windsor RE, Storm S, Sugar R, Nagula D. Cervical transforaminal injection: review of the literature, complications, and a suggested technique. Pain Physician 2003;6:457-465.</td>
<td>Systematic Review and 3 case reports</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Cervical Transforaminal</td>
<td>6 mg betamethasone + 2.5 mL of 0.75% bupivacaine (1 patient) or betamethasone = 2 mL lidocaine (1 patient) both partially injected</td>
<td>Fluoroscopy</td>
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### Table 1. Types of procedures, approaches, and type of steroids cited in the FDA safety report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
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<th>Number of Patients</th>
<th>Approach Type</th>
<th>Type of Steroids</th>
<th>Imaging guidance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. Ludwig MA, Burns SP. Spinal cord infarction following cervical transforaminal epidural injection: a case report. Spine 2005;30:E266-8.</td>
<td>Case Report</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cervical Transforaminal</td>
<td>0.75 ml triamcinolone + 0.75 ml 0.75% bupivacaine</td>
<td>Fluoroscopy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
entiates the respective approaches to spinal injections using steroid medications, while also accounting for the differences in medication type and the presence or absence of particulate matter in those injectates. From a safety perspective, patients and clinicians alike should be presented with factual and evidence-based assessments of treatment modalities to avoid causing unnecessary panic and to eliminate the dissemination of misinformation regarding treatment options available to them. Access to effective and safe treatment is an underlying premise of the evolving health care environment, and we propose an immediate retraction of the April 23, 2014 FDA warning regarding epidural steroid use since this warning does not accomplish that mission.

Kenneth D. Candido, MD
Chairman and Professor
Department of Anesthesiology
Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center
836 W. Wellington Ave. Suite 4815
Chicago, IL 60657
Department of Anesthesiology
University of Illinois
Chicago, IL
E-mail: kdcandido@yahoo.com

Nebojsa Nick Knezevic, MD, PhD
Director of Anesthesiology Research
Clinical Assistant Professor of Anesthesiology
Department of Anesthesiology,
Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center
Chicago, IL 60657
Department of Anesthesiology
University of Illinois, Chicago, IL 60612

George C. Chang Chien, DO
Pain Medicine Fellow
Department of Anesthesiology
Cleveland Clinic Foundation
Cleveland, OH 44195

Timothy R. Deer, MD
Clinical Professor of Anesthesiology
And Medical Director of Pain Medicine
Center for Pain Relief
Charleston, WV, 25301
West Virginia School of Medicine
Charleston Division
Charleston, WV 25304

George C. Chang Chien, DO
Pain Medicine Fellow
Department of Anesthesiology
Cleveland Clinic Foundation
Cleveland, OH 44195

References


