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Article:

Emery, P (2016) Introduction: the future of rheumatoid arthritis management. *Current Opinion in Rheumatology*, 28 (3). p. 259. ISSN 1040-8711

<https://doi.org/10.1097/BOR.0000000000000275>

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Introduction: The Future of RA Management

This review provides a state-of-the-art assessment of current approaches to RA. This is an area that has advanced considerably in the last few years. There is now general agreement that the ambition of the treatment of early RA should be remission and that targeted approaches are the best way to achieve this.

There is less consensus on whether an aggressive remission-induction (with subsequent withdrawal of therapy) is optimal and whether biologic therapy should be part of this approach. Certainly the data suggests that an early remission can be achieved with biologics and that less radiographic progression occurs. A key issue is whether this is cost-effective.

One area of growing consensus is that early achievement of remission in milder patients does allow withdrawal of biologics if these are used at first instance.

What is new

It is clear that the phenotype of rheumatoid arthritis is not fixed but evolves over time and the exciting pre-clinical data are now being validated. The chance for early intervention to prevent RA is now a realistic possibility. The role of ACPA has been crucial in this and allows of early identification of patients at risk. The approaches required to demonstrate efficacy in the presence of already effective therapy are discussed.

Where to improve

In terms of therapy, steroids still have a valuable role in the management of early arthritis where long term toxicity remains an issue whilst for monitoring x-rays still has a value but MRI and ultrasound will increase sensitivity. There are challenges to put the value of x-rays in perspective.

An important new development has been the development of vaccination for patients in RA particularly herpes zoster. Hopefully the safety of live vaccines will be shown shortly and in the future the value of killed vaccine will be demonstrated so that herpes zoster will be a much less prevalent problem. The other issues of vaccinating for flu and pneumococcus will also improve outcome.

All these issues are addressed, and hopefully will stimulate discussion.