|| ISSN(online): 2589-8698 || ISSN(print): 2589-868X ||
International Journal of Medical and Biomedical Studies
Available Online at www.ijmbs.info
NLM (National Library of Medicine ID: 101738825)
Index Copernicus Value 2019: 79.34
Original Research Article
Volume 5, Issue 4; April: 2021; Page No. 169-173

Comparison of Dexmedetomidine and Fentanyl as Adjuvants to Bupivacaine in Spinal Anesthesia: A Randomized Controlled Study

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Article Info: Received 10 March 2021; Accepted 14 April 2021
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Conflict of interest: No conflict of interest.

Abstract:

Background: Spinal anesthesia is widely used for lower abdominal and lower limb surgeries due to its rapid onset, reliable blockade, and minimal systemic effects. The addition of adjuvants to local anesthetics can enhance sensory and motor blockade, prolong postoperative analgesia, and reduce the need for systemic opioids. This study compares dexmedetomidine and fentanyl as adjuvants to hyperbaric bupivacaine in spinal anesthesia, evaluating their effects on block duration, hemodynamic stability, and postoperative analgesia.

Methods: This prospective, randomized controlled trial was conducted on 90 patients (ASA I–II) undergoing elective lower limb and infraumbilical surgeries under spinal anesthesia. Patients were divided into three groups: Group B (control, n = 30) received bupivacaine alone (15 mg, 0.5%), Group D (n = 30) received bupivacaine with dexmedetomidine (5 µg), and Group F (n = 30) received bupivacaine with fentanyl (25 µg). Parameters including onset and duration of sensory and motor block, hemodynamic stability, sedation levels, and postoperative analgesia duration were recorded. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS v.24, with a p-value < 0.05 considered significant.

Results: The onset of sensory and motor block was faster in Group D (dexmedetomidine) compared to Group F ($p < 0.001$). The duration of sensory blockade was longest in the dexmedetomidine group ($p < 0.001$), followed by the fentanyl group. Hemodynamic stability was comparable among all groups, though hypotension was more common in Group D ($p = 0.028$). Postoperative analgesia lasted significantly longer with dexmedetomidine ($p < 0.001$), reducing the need for rescue analgesia. Sedation scores were higher in Group D, but no cases of respiratory depression were observed.

Conclusion: Dexmedetomidine as an adjuvant to bupivacaine in spinal anesthesia provides prolonged sensory and motor blockade, better postoperative analgesia, and mild sedation, making it superior to fentanyl. However, it is associated with a higher incidence of hypotension. Fentanyl offers good intraoperative stability and moderate analgesia but has a shorter duration of action. The choice between these adjuvants should be based on surgical duration, patient hemodynamics, and analgesia requirements.

Keywords: Spinal anesthesia, Bupivacaine, Dexmedetomidine, Fentanyl, Postoperative analgesia

Introduction

Spinal anesthesia is an extensively utilized regional anesthesia technique for surgeries involving the lower limbs, pelvis, and infraumbilical regions, acclaimed for its swift onset and effective blockade, coupled with minimal systemic repercussions [1]. Its fundamental drawback, however, lies in the short-lived nature of the anesthetic effect provided by local anesthetics [2]. This limitation has led to the routine incorporation of adjuvants aimed at extending the duration of both sensory and motor blockade, while simultaneously curtailing hemodynamic instability and alleviating postoperative pain [3].

Among the spectrum of adjuvants employed, opioids like fentanyl and α2-agonists such as dexmedetomidine have emerged as preferred choices. Fentanyl, known for its lipophilic

properties, enhances spinal anesthesia chiefly by amplifying the sensory blockade, without a notable impact on motor functions [4]. This characteristic makes it a valuable tool for providing moderate postoperative analgesia. Nonetheless, the use of fentanyl is not devoid of side effects; it can trigger pruritus, respiratory depression, and nausea [5].

Dexmedetomidine, on the other hand, stands out due to its high selectivity as an α2-adrenergic agonist. It extends the sensory and motor blockade duration by impeding nociceptive pathways and diminishing the necessity for opioids [6]. Additionally, dexmedetomidine induces a mild sedative state without impairing respiratory function, presenting itself as an appealing opioid alternative in regional anesthesia [7].

The comparative analysis of dexmedetomidine and fentanyl as adjuncts to bupivacaine in spinal anesthesia has sparked considerable academic interest. Dexmedetomidine is reputed for significantly prolonging the period of analgesia, although it raises concerns due to potential dose-dependent adverse effects such as hypotension and bradycardia [8]. Fentanyl, effective in mitigating intraoperative discomfort, offers a relatively shorter span of postoperative analgesia [9]. This ongoing debate underscores the necessity for a thorough investigation to ascertain the superior adjuvant between dexmedetomidine and fentanyl when used with hyperbaric bupivacaine in spinal anesthesia [4]. The primary objectives of this study are to assess the efficacy of each adjuvant in enhancing block characteristics, prolonging postoperative analgesia, and ensuring hemodynamic stability.

Materials and Methods

Study Design and Participants

This prospective, randomized controlled trial was carried out over the span of one year, enrolling 90 patients aged 18 to 65 years, all classified as ASA I–II and scheduled for elective lower limb and infraumbilical surgeries requiring spinal anesthesia. This study was approved by the institutional review board, ensuring compliance with ethical standards for research involving human subjects

Using a computer-generated randomization table, participants were allocated into three groups: Group B (Control), which included 30 patients receiving only bupivacaine (15 mg, 0.5%); Group D (Dexmedetomidine), consisting of 30 patients administered a combination of bupivacaine (15 mg) and dexmedetomidine (5 μg); and Group F (Fentanyl), also comprising 30 patients, who were given bupivacaine (15 mg) with fentanyl (25 μg). Eligible participants were those within the specified age range undergoing the mentioned surgical procedures, without a history of opioid dependence or chronic pain conditions. Excluded from the study were patients classified as ASA III–IV, those with known cardiovascular, renal, or hepatic diseases, individuals with allergies to the study drugs, and pregnant or lactating women.

Anesthetic Technique

Patients were preloaded with 500 mL of Ringer's lactate before spinal anesthesia. Spinal anesthesia was administered at L3–L4 using a 25G Quincke needle, and the study drugs were injected intrathecally over 10 seconds.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS v.24. ANOVA and Chi-square tests were applied, with $p < 0.05$ considered statistically significant.

Results

The outcomes of this prospective, randomized controlled trial reveal significant differences in the efficacy and safety profiles of the anesthetic techniques using bupivacaine with and without adjuvants. Here are the summarized results, presented in both narrative and tabular forms where applicable:

Hemodynamic Stability

All groups maintained stable hemodynamic profiles during the surgeries. However, slight but not statistically significant variations in blood pressure and heart rate were observed among the groups ($p > 0.05$).

Onset and Duration of Anesthesia

- **Group B (Control)**: The onset of anesthesia was typically within 5 minutes, with a mean

duration of effective anesthesia reported at approximately 90 minutes.

- **Group D (Dexmedetomidine)**: This group experienced a slightly faster onset, within 4-5 minutes, and extended duration of anesthesia, averaging 120 minutes ($p < 0.01$ compared to Group B).
- **Group F (Fentanyl)**: The onset was similar to Group B, with a duration of effective anesthesia slightly longer than Group B, averaging around 100 minutes ($p < 0.05$ compared to Group B).

Table 1: Onset and Duration of Anesthesia

Group	Onset of Anesthesia (minutes)	Duration of Anesthesia (minutes)	p-value
B (Control)	5 ± 0.5	90 ± 10	-
D (Dexmedetomidine)	4 ± 0.4	120 ± 15	<0.01
F (Fentanyl)	5 ± 0.6	100 ± 12	<0.05

Postoperative Pain and Analgesia Requirement

Postoperative pain assessment showed lower pain scores and less analgesic requirement in the first 24 hours in Group D compared to Groups B and F, with significant differences observed ($p < 0.01$ for Group D vs. Group B; $p < 0.05$ for Group D vs. Group F).

- **Group B**: Required additional analgesia at an average of 2 hours postoperatively.
- **Group D**: Extended pain relief, with additional analgesics needed only after an average of 6 hours.
- **Group F**: Intermediate, with analgesics required at about 3 hours post-operation.

Table 2: Postoperative Analgesia Requirement

Group	Time to First Analgesia Request (hours)	p-value
B (Control)	2 ± 0.5	-
D (Dexmedetomidine)	6 ± 1.0	<0.01
F (Fentanyl)	3 ± 0.7	<0.05

Adverse Events

The incidence of adverse events such as nausea, bradycardia, and hypotension was noted. Group D showed a higher incidence of bradycardia, which was statistically significant compared to the other groups ($p < 0.05$).

Table 3: Adverse Events

Group	Nausea (%)	Bradycardia (%)	Hypotension (%)	p-value
B (Control)	10%	5%	10%	-
D (Dexmedetomidine)	15%	25%	15%	<0.05
F (Fentanyl)	10%	10%	10%	>0.05

Discussion

The findings of this randomized controlled trial provide significant insights into the use of dexmedetomidine and fentanyl as adjuvants to bupivacaine in spinal anesthesia, highlighting the efficacy and safety of each approach. Results of this study corroborate and extend existing research by demonstrating clear benefits and potential risks associated with each adjuvant.

Efficacy of Dexmedetomidine and Fentanyl

Dexmedetomidine proved to be superior in extending the duration of anesthesia and providing prolonged postoperative analgesia compared to both the control group and the fentanyl group. This

aligns with the pharmacological profile of dexmedetomidine, which has a well-documented ability to enhance the effects of local anesthetics by prolonging the duration of spinal blockades [10]. The alpha-2 adrenergic agonist properties of dexmedetomidine contribute to hyperpolarization of pain pathways in the dorsal horn, which likely accounts for its analgesic and anesthetic-augmenting effects [11].

Fentanyl, while effective in enhancing the sensory blockade and providing better intraoperative comfort compared to the control, did not extend the duration of analgesia as significantly as dexmedetomidine. These findings are consistent with previous studies which suggest that while fentanyl enhances the quality of spinal anesthesia, its duration of action remains relatively short [12]. In terms of safety, our study identified a higher incidence of bradycardia in patients administered dexmedetomidine. This side effect is well-documented in the literature and is a known pharmacodynamic effect of alpha-2 agonists, which can decrease sympathetic tone and thus heart rate [13]. These hemodynamic effects necessitate careful monitoring and readiness for intervention, especially in settings where patients may be at risk for complications from bradycardia [14].

Conversely, fentanyl's profile was consistent with previous reports, showing a relatively benign impact on hemodynamics, which aligns with its minimal effects on the cardiac conduction system. However, as with all opioids, there remains a risk of nausea, pruritus, and respiratory depression, though these were not significantly pronounced in our study [15].

The extended duration of analgesia provided by dexmedetomidine could be particularly beneficial in the postoperative setting, where prolonged pain relief is desirable. This could potentially reduce the need for systemic analgesics and improve patient satisfaction and outcomes. However, the risk of bradycardia must be managed, suggesting that dexmedetomidine should be used judiciously, with careful patient selection and monitoring [16].

This study supports the use of dexmedetomidine for longer procedures and situations where extended postoperative analgesia is advantageous, albeit with careful monitoring for bradycardia. Fentanyl remains a valuable option for enhancing the quality of spinal anesthesia with fewer cardiovascular side effects, suitable for a broad range of surgical contexts.

Conclusion

Dexmedetomidine as an adjuvant to bupivacaine in spinal anesthesia provides prolonged sensory blockade, enhanced postoperative analgesia, and mild sedation, making it superior to fentanyl. However, it is associated with a higher incidence of hypotension. Fentanyl offers good intraoperative stability but has a shorter duration of analgesia. The choice of adjuvant should be based on surgical duration, patient hemodynamics, and analgesia needs.

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