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Treatment in Severe Acute Pancreatitis – Still a Reason for Debate: A Comprehensive Review

Mohammed Dawood Al Ruwaimi¹, Sajjad Redha Alturfi¹, Mohammed Abdullatif Almas¹, Aqeel Ali Alnofaily¹, Al Hannabi, Youssef Haji¹, Ahmed Taher Al-Sayafi², Abdullah Jafar Almusharaf², Kawther Salman Alghanem², Layla Jassem Almuhassein², Rehab Abdulla Salman Albuarish², Nouf Owaid Alharbi², Mohammed Abdulaziz Albarrak², Bayan Ibrahim Almakrani³, Zahra Salman Alghasham¹, Zainab Ali Mohammed Alhaddad¹

1. Prince Saud Bin Jalawy Hospital
2. maternity and children hospital
3. King Fahad Hospital- Al Hofuf

ABSTRACT

Severe acute pancreatitis (SAP) remains a challenging condition with significant morbidity and mortality despite advancements in medical and surgical care. Current treatment strategies are multifactorial, involving supportive care, nutritional management, infection control, and surgical intervention when indicated. However, there is still an ongoing debate regarding optimal approaches, including the timing of interventions, use of antibiotics, and the role of minimally invasive procedures. This review highlights recent evidence and controversies in the management of SAP, focusing on the efficacy and timing of treatment modalities to improve patient outcomes.

Introduction

Acute pancreatitis is an inflammatory condition of the pancreas with varying severity, ranging from mild self-limiting cases to severe, life-threatening disease. Severe acute pancreatitis (SAP) accounts for approximately 20% of cases and is characterized by organ failure, necrosis, and systemic inflammatory response syndrome (SIRS)(1). Mortality rates in SAP remain high, ranging from 15% to 30%, particularly in patients with infected pancreatic necrosis or multi-organ failure.

Despite significant research, the treatment of SAP remains a subject of debate due to controversies regarding fluid resuscitation, antibiotic use, timing of surgical intervention, and nutritional support. This review critically evaluates current strategies and the unresolved challenges in the treatment of SAP.

Pathophysiology of Severe Acute Pancreatitis

SAP results from autodigestion of the pancreas by activated enzymes, leading to local inflammation and systemic complications. This inflammatory cascade can cause:

- **Pancreatic Necrosis:** Extensive tissue death increases the risk of infection and systemic toxicity.
- **Systemic Inflammatory Response Syndrome (SIRS):** Results in multi-organ dysfunction.
- **Complications:** Local (e.g., pseudocysts, abscesses) and systemic (e.g., sepsis, ARDS, renal failure) (2).

The complex pathophysiology underscores the need for multifaceted treatment approaches (3).

Current Treatment Strategies and Controversies

• Early Fluid Resuscitation

Fluid resuscitation is essential to maintain organ perfusion and prevent hypovolemic shock.

• Aggressive vs. Conservative Resuscitation:

Recent studies have shown that excessive fluid administration can exacerbate pancreatic edema, abdominal compartment syndrome, and organ dysfunction (4).

- A randomized trial suggested that goal-directed, conservative resuscitation improves outcomes.
- However, the optimal fluid type (crystalloids vs. colloids) remains debated. Lactated Ringer's solution is preferred over normal saline due to its reduced risk of metabolic acidosis (5).

2. Antibiotic Use in Pancreatic Necrosis

Infected pancreatic necrosis is a leading cause of mortality in SAP.

- **Prophylactic Antibiotics:** Previously, prophylactic antibiotics were widely used, but recent evidence does not support their routine use due to concerns about antibiotic resistance and lack of impact on mortality (6).

A Cochrane review concluded that prophylactic antibiotics do not reduce infection rates or mortality (7).

- **Targeted Antibiotics:** Antibiotics are recommended only in cases of confirmed or strongly suspected infection, guided by imaging and cultures.(8)

3. Nutritional Support

Nutritional intervention is critical in SAP due to the hypermetabolic state and risk of malnutrition.

- **Enteral Nutrition (EN) vs. Parenteral Nutrition (PN):**

Enteral nutrition is preferred over parenteral nutrition as it preserves gut integrity, reduces infection rates, and improves outcomes(9).

Early nasojejunal feeding is safe and recommended for patients unable to tolerate oral intake (10).

- **Timing of Nutrition:** Early initiation of enteral feeding (within 24-48 hours) is associated with reduced mortality and complications (11).

4. Minimally Invasive vs. Open Surgical Intervention

Necrotizing pancreatitis often necessitates intervention.

- **Timing of Intervention:** The “step-up approach” involving delayed intervention (>3-4 weeks) allows for necrotic demarcation and reduces surgical risks (11).
- **Minimally Invasive Techniques:**

Percutaneous drainage and video-assisted retroperitoneal debridement (VARD) have largely replaced open surgery due to lower mortality and complication rates (12).

A randomized trial demonstrated that the step-up approach significantly reduced organ failure compared to immediate open surgery [15].

- **Open Surgery:** Reserved for patients with extensive necrosis unresponsive to minimally invasive techniques.(13)

5. Role of Immunomodulatory Therapies

Given the role of SIRS and immune dysregulation in SAP, emerging therapies targeting inflammation are under investigation.

- Agents such as **pentoxifylline**, **IL-1 inhibitors**, and **activated protein C** show potential in reducing systemic inflammation (14).
- However, these therapies are experimental and not yet part of clinical guidelines.

Recent Advances and Emerging Strategies

- **Endoscopic Interventions:** Endoscopic ultrasound-guided drainage and necrosectomy are minimally invasive options gaining popularity(15).
- **Hemofiltration:** Continuous renal replacement therapy (CRRT) may help control inflammatory mediators in SAP(16).
- **Biomarker-Guided Management:** Use of biomarkers like procalcitonin and IL-6 for early diagnosis of infection and treatment guidance is being explored.

Unresolved Debates and Challenges

Despite advancements, several controversies remain:

- **Optimal Fluid Management:** Defining the balance between adequate resuscitation and fluid overload.
- **Antibiotic Strategy:** Determining the role of prophylactic antibiotics in specific subgroups.
- **Timing of Intervention:** Identifying the ideal time for surgical or endoscopic intervention.
- **Novel Therapies:** Establishing the clinical efficacy of immunomodulators and hemofiltration.

Conclusion

The management of severe acute pancreatitis continues to evolve, with ongoing debates regarding fluid resuscitation strategies, the role of antibiotics, and the timing and type of interventions. Current evidence supports a multidisciplinary approach, including conservative fluid resuscitation, early

enteral nutrition, targeted antibiotics, and minimally invasive techniques for pancreatic necrosis. Further research is needed to address unresolved challenges and improve outcomes in SAP patients.

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