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2022-01

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/342091>

Katsanos, K, Spiliopoulos, S, Teichgraeber, U, Kitrou, P, Del Giudice, C, Björkman, P, Bisdas, T, de Boer, S, Krokidis, M & Karnabatidis, D 2022, 'Risk of Major Amputation Following Application of Paclitaxel Coated Balloons in the Lower Limb Arteries : A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Randomised Controlled Trials', *European Journal of Vascular and Endovascular Surgery*, vol. 63, no. 1, pp. 60-71. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejvs.2021.05.027>

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SYSTEMATIC RCT REVIEW

Editor's Choice – Risk of Major Amputation Following Application of Paclitaxel Coated Balloons in the Lower Limb Arteries: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Randomised Controlled Trials

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WHAT THIS PAPER ADDS

Previous meta-analyses have identified a higher risk of all cause death using paclitaxel coated devices in the femoropopliteal arteries, and of the composite of all cause death and major amputation in the infrapopliteal arteries. A systematic review and meta-analysis was performed of randomised controlled trials to investigate the long term risk of major amputation alone associated using paclitaxel drug coated balloons (DCB) in the lower limbs. A significantly higher long term risk of major limb loss using DCB in the femoropopliteal and/or infrapopliteal arteries was documented. There was also evidence of a significant non-linear dose response relationship.

Objective: There have been concerns about the long term safety of paclitaxel coated devices in the lower limbs. A formal systematic review and meta-analysis of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) was performed to examine the long term risk of major amputation using paclitaxel coated balloons in peripheral arterial disease (PAD).

Method: This systematic review was registered with PROSPERO (ID 227761). A broad bibliographic search was performed for RCTs investigating paclitaxel coated balloons in the peripheral arteries (femoropopliteal and infrapopliteal) for treatment of intermittent claudication or critical limb ischaemia (CLI). The literature search was last updated on 20 February 2021 without any restrictions on publication language, date, or status. Major amputations were analysed with time to event methods employing one and two stage models. Sensitivity and subgroup analyses, combinatorial meta-analysis, and a multivariable dose response meta-analysis to examine presence of a biological gradient were also performed.

Results: In all, 21 RCTs with 3 760 lower limbs were analysed (52% intermittent claudication and 48% CLI; median follow up two years). There were 87 major amputations of 2 216 limbs in the paclitaxel arms (4.0% crude risk) compared with 41 major amputations in 1 544 limbs in the control arms (2.7% crude risk). The risk of major amputation was significantly higher for paclitaxel coated balloons with a hazard ratio (HR) of 1.66 (95% CI 1.14 – 2.42; $p = .008$, one stage stratified Cox model). The prediction interval was 95% CI 1.10 – 2.46 (two stage model). The observed amputation risk was consistent for both femoropopliteal ($p = .055$) and infrapopliteal ($p = .055$) vessels. Number needed to harm was 35 for CLI. There was good evidence of a significant non-linear dose response relationship with accelerated risk per cumulative paclitaxel dose (chi square model $p = .007$). There was no evidence of publication bias ($p = .80$) and no significant statistical heterogeneity between studies ($I^2 = 0\%$, $p = .77$). Results were stable across sensitivity analyses (different models and subgroups based on anatomy and clinical indication and excluding unpublished trials). There were no influential single trials. Level of certainty in evidence was downrated from high to moderate because of sparse events in some studies.

Conclusion: There appears to be heightened risk of major amputation after use of paclitaxel coated balloons in the peripheral arteries. Further investigations are warranted urgently.

Keywords: Amputation, Balloon, Dose, Meta-analysis, Paclitaxel-coated, Randomised

Article history: Received 5 March 2021, Accepted 23 May 2021, Available online 27 July 2021

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INTRODUCTION

Several randomised controlled trials (RCTs) have already shown that paclitaxel coated balloons significantly reduce the rates of vessel re-stenosis and target lesion revascularisation of the femoropopliteal artery in patients with symptomatic peripheral arterial disease (PAD).¹ Recently, concerns have been raised about the long term risk of death using paclitaxel coated devices in the femoropopliteal artery.^{2,3} However, inconsistencies between randomised and real world evidence,^{4,5} coupled with the absence of a plausible biological mechanism have fuelled an ongoing unresolved controversy on the role of paclitaxel in peripheral endovascular procedures. An interim mortality analysis of the SWEDEPAD randomised trial did not confirm a heightened mortality risk in cases of paclitaxel treatment.⁶ Another more recent meta-analysis has claimed a significant detriment to amputation free survival using paclitaxel coated balloons in the infrapopliteal arteries for critical limb ischaemia (CLI) and has further intensified the debate around safety and effectiveness of paclitaxel coated balloons in the periphery.⁷ Non-target embolisation of cytotoxic paclitaxel particulate material with long lasting tissue residence has been put forward as a possible mechanism for potential adverse limb events.⁷ An updated systematic review and meta-analysis of RCTs was performed to investigate the risk of major amputation associated using paclitaxel coated balloons in the lower limbs.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

PICO tool and selection criteria

The design of the present systematic review and meta-analysis complied with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses) statement.⁸ The focus was on major amputations only, because other measures of safety and clinical effectiveness have already been thoroughly reported.¹ The PICO tool (Patient, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome)⁹ was used to define the scientific question as follows: *“In patients suffering from peripheral arterial disease, is treatment of the peripheral (femoropopliteal and infrapopliteal) arteries with paclitaxel coated balloons, compared with control treatment, safe and effective in preventing major amputation in PAD?”*. Each study was assessed for potential inclusion in the current meta-analysis on the basis of the following eligibility criteria: (1) only RCTs were considered for inclusion, (2) all types of paclitaxel coated balloon catheters were eligible provided that they were applied in the lower limb arteries, (3) selection allowed for both femoropopliteal and infrapopliteal arteries of the lower limbs, (4) the target population included patients presenting with symptoms of peripheral arterial disease (intermittent claudication or CLI documented by digital subtraction angiography, (4) follow

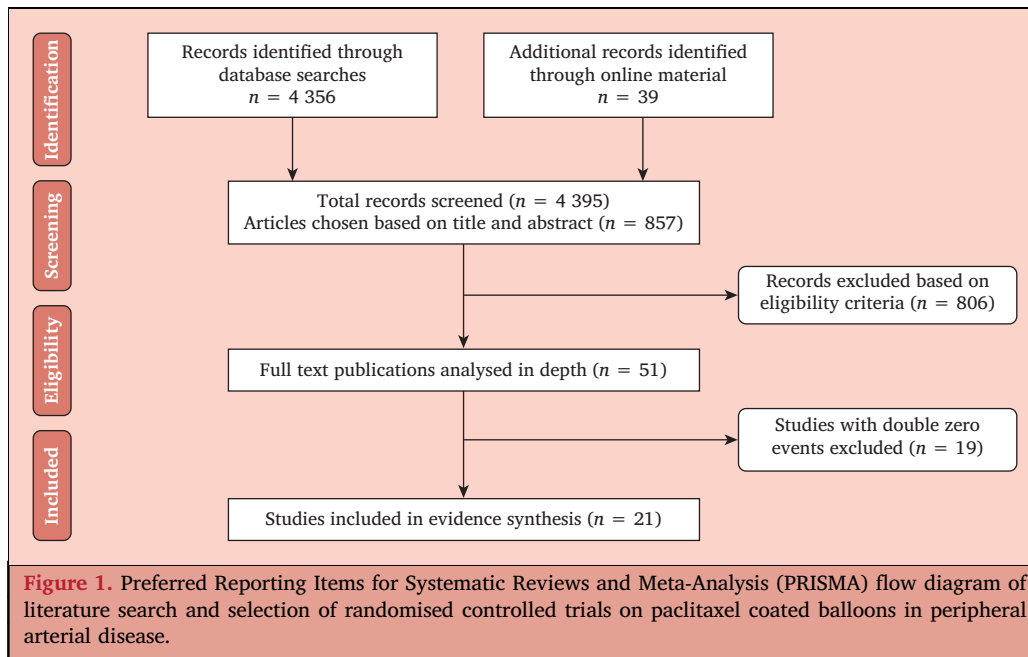
up of at least six months was available, and (5) the studies reported counts of major amputations as part of their primary or secondary endpoints.

Search methods

This systematic review was registered in the PROSPERO public database (<http://www.crd.york.ac.uk/PROSPERO>; ID 227761). The authors searched for RCTs that investigated any type of paclitaxel coated or paclitaxel eluting balloon catheter in the peripheral arteries for the treatment of intermittent claudication or critical limb ischaemia. Electronic searches were conducted of PubMed (Medline), EMBASE (Ovid), AMED, Scopus, CENTRAL, the PROSPERO, and DARE databases. A broad bibliographic search was performed using the search string *“(drug-coated OR paclitaxel-coated OR paclitaxel-eluting OR drug-eluting) AND (randomized)”*. Additional searches of the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA), European Medicines Agency (EMA), United Kingdom Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), Japanese Pharmaceuticals and Medical Devices Agency (PMDA), Japanese University Hospital Medical Information Network Clinical Trials Registry (UMIN-CTR), Chinese Clinical Trials Registry (ChiCTR), and United States National Library of Medicine clinical trials database, and online archives of international cardiovascular conferences were performed including the terms *“femoral”, “popliteal”, “femoropopliteal”, “restenosis”, “target lesion revascularization”, “peripheral”, “angioplasty”, “stent”, “tibial”, “infrapopliteal”, “below knee”, “balloon”, “paclitaxel-coated”, “paclitaxel-eluting”, “drug-coated”, “drug-eluting”, “peripheral arterial disease”, “peripheral vascular disease”, “intermittent claudication”, “critical limb ischaemia”, “plain balloon angioplasty”, “percutaneous transluminal angioplasty”, “clinical trial”, “multi-center”, “randomized”, “controlled trial”, and various pertinent terms with the corresponding Medical Subjects Headings (MeSH) using Boolean syntax. The literature search was last updated on 20 February 2021. There were no restrictions on publication language, publication date, or publication status.*

Data extraction and primary outcome

A standardised data extraction form was used to collect the following information from all selected studies: (1) characteristics of the study design methods (randomisation, blinding, concealment of allocation, dropouts, outcome reporting, risk of bias); (2) patient and limb sample size and baseline clinical characteristics; (3) Rutherford classification of peripheral vascular disease; (4) description of active drug coated balloon (DCB) device and control endovascular treatment; and (5) major amputation counts at different follow up time intervals. The primary outcome measure was set at major amputation defined as any reported limb loss



of the index limb above the ankle. Major amputations were analysed on an intention to treat approach. Minor amputations were excluded from the present analysis.

Risk of bias and certainty of evidence

Risk of bias assessment employed the revised Cochrane Collaboration's tool for assessing risk of bias (RoB 2 tool).^{10,11} The latter tool evaluates potential risk of bias for five domains: (1) randomisation process, (2) deviation from intended interventions, (3) missing outcome data, (4) measurement of outcomes, and (5) selection of the reported results. Certainty of evidence was assessed with the Grading of Recommendations Assessment, Development and Evaluation (GRADE) system, which considers risk of bias, imprecision, indirectness, inconsistency, and publication bias of the observed treatment effect as potential reasons for downgrading the level of confidence. Conversely, certainty about the quality of the evidence can be upgraded for large effect size or presence of a dose response gradient.¹²

Sensitivity and subgroup analyses

Heterogeneity was evaluated with the Cochran's Q (chi square) and the I^2 statistical test, while small study effects and publication bias were assessed by visual inspection of funnel plots asymmetry and quantitatively with the Egger's linear regression test.¹³ Several sensitivity and subgroup analyses of the primary endpoint were performed to assess consistency and robustness of the summary treatment effect. Subgroups of different paclitaxel coated balloons based on paclitaxel concentration (2.0 $\mu\text{g}/\text{mm}^2$ vs. 3.0 vs. 3.5 $\mu\text{g}/\text{mm}^2$) were analysed. Leave one out meta-analysis and combinatorial meta-analysis were applied to test for influential studies (single cases or clusters of studies), interrogate between study heterogeneity, and better visualise the distribution of the pooled effect estimate after examining

all possible study combinations (2^{k-1} , where k is the number of selected RCTs).¹⁴ Attrition bias was assessed first by comparing dropouts rates and consent withdrawals between treatment arms, and second by multiple imputation of right censored cases assuming departure from independent censoring.^{15,16}

Dose response meta-analysis

In the search for epidemiological evidence of causation, a quantitative multivariable dose response meta-analysis was undertaken to investigate the potential presence of a biological gradient using the methods of Crippa *et al.*¹⁷ Cumulative intraprocedural paclitaxel dose was extracted from published material or inferred from the product of the paclitaxel coated balloon concentration [C] and treated vessel surface area (surface area of a cylinder based on reported lesion length [L] and vessel diameter [D]). It is widely recommended (and explicitly stated in most RCT protocols) that DCB application is performed with a longer balloon compared with the target lesion length to avoid geographic miss. Hence, lesion length L was corrected for routine practice of longer DCB sizing based on a validation model of six RCTs that reported actual paclitaxel dose delivered (Supplementary material). Linear and non-linear dose response models were explored.

Statistical methods

Studies with zero events in both study arms were excluded from numerical synthesis according to Cochrane guidance (Cochrane handbook chapter 16.9.3). Quantitative synthesis of the included RCTs was performed with the "meta", "dmetar", "metafor", "survival", "coxme", "Informative-Censoring", and "dosresmeta" packages in R language environment (version 3.6.3). Categorical variables were expressed as counts and percentages, and continuous variables as means \pm standard deviation. To address

Table 1. Design characteristics of included randomised controlled trials on paclitaxel coated balloons in peripheral arterial disease for claudication or critical limb ischaemia (CLI)

Study*, authors and year	Design and patients (limbs) sample	Paclitaxel coated balloon tested	Paclitaxel dosage and excipient	Baseline CLI diagnosis – %	Lesion anatomy and length – cm	Available follow up period – y
THUNDER ^{29,31} Tepe <i>et al.</i> 2008	Multicentre 102 (48 vs. 54)	Cotavance Bavaria Medizin (MedRad)	3.0 µg / mm ² Paccocath (Iopromide)	19.6	Femoropopliteal 7.5 ± 6.2	5
FEMPAC ³² Werk <i>et al.</i> 2008	Multicentre 87 (45 vs. 42)	Cotavance Bavaria Medizin (MedRad)	3.0 µg / mm ² Paccocath (Iopromide)	5.7	Femoropopliteal 5.7 ± 5.5	2
IN.PACT SFA ^{42,62–64} Schneider <i>et al.</i> 2015	Multicentre 331 (220 vs. 111)	IN.PACT Admiral Medtronic	3.5 µg / mm ² Urea	5.4	Femoropopliteal 8.9 ± 4.9	5
LEVANT I ^{26,65} Scheinert <i>et al.</i> 2014	Multicentre 101 (49 vs. 52)	Lutonix (Bard) BD	2.0 µg / mm ² Polysorbate and Sorbitol	6.9	Femoropopliteal 8.8 ± 3.7	2
LEVANT II ^{25,65} Rosenfield <i>et al.</i> 2015 (incl. roll-in)	Multicentre 532 (372 vs. 160)	Lutonix (Bard) BD	2.0 µg / mm ² Polysorbate and Sorbitol	8.0	Femoropopliteal 6.2 ± 4.2	1
ACOART I ^{28,66} Jia <i>et al.</i> 2016	Multicentre 200 (100 vs. 100)	Orchid Acotec Scientific	3.0 µg / mm ² Magnesium stearate	42.0	Femoropopliteal 14.7 ± 11.0	2
ILLUMENATE Pivotal ²⁴ Krishnan <i>et al.</i> 2017	Multicentre 300 (200 vs. 100)	Stellarex by Spectranetics	2.0 µg / mm ² Polyethylene- glycol	4.3	Femoropopliteal 8.0 ± 4.5	4
DRECOREST I ⁴⁰ Bjorkman <i>et al.</i> 2018	Single centre 60 (30 vs. 30)	IN.PACT Admiral Medtronic	3.5 µg / mm ² Urea	43.3 (failing bypass)	Femoropopliteal 1.2 ± 1.0	5
COPA CABANA ³⁰ Tepe <i>et al.</i> 2020	Multicentre 87 (47 vs. 41)	Cotavance Bavaria Medizin (MedRad)	3.0 µg / mm ² Paccocath (Iopromide)	9.2	Femoropopliteal 15.2 ± 8.5	2
PACUS ⁴⁴ Giudice <i>et al.</i> 2017	Single centre 56 (28 vs. 28)	IN.PACT Admiral Medtronic	3.5 µg / mm ² Urea	100.0	Femoropopliteal 16.4 ± 1.4	2
RAPID ^{38,39} De Boer <i>et al.</i> 2017	Multicentre 160 (80 vs. 80)	Legflow and stent Cardionovum	3.0 µg / mm ² Ammonium salt	17.0	Femoropopliteal 15.8 ± 7.4	2
BELGIAN IN.PACT ⁴¹ Debing <i>et al.</i> 2017	Multicentre 106 (52 vs. 54)	IN.PACT Admiral Medtronic	3.5 µg / mm ² Urea	52.8	Femoropopliteal 7.7 ± 5.8	6 mo
REEWARM ³⁶ Ye <i>et al.</i> 2020	Multicentre 200 (100 vs. 100)	Reewarm Endovastec China	3.0 µg / mm ² Iopromide	27.0	Femoropopliteal 9.6 ± 4.8	1
DEBELLUM ^{43,67} Fanelli <i>et al.</i> 2014	Single centre 50 (33 vs. 38)	IN.PACT Admiral Medtronic	3.5 µg / mm ² Urea	38.0	Femoropopliteal and infrapopliteal 7.6 ± 0.6	1
DEBATE-BTK ⁴⁵ Liistro <i>et al.</i> 2013	Single centre 132 (71 vs. 72)	IN.PACT Amphirion Medtronic	3.5 µg / mm ² Urea	100.0	Infrapopliteal 12.9 ± 8.3	2
IN.PACT DEEP ^{46,68} Zeller <i>et al.</i> 2014	Multicentre 358 (239 vs. 119)	IN.PACT Amphirion Medtronic	3.5 µg / mm ² Urea	99.7	Infrapopliteal 10.2 ± 9.1	5
BIOLUX P-II ³⁷ Zeller <i>et al.</i> 2015	Multicentre 72 (36 vs. 36)	Passeo-18 Lux Biotronik	3.0 µg / mm ² BTHC	77.8	Infrapopliteal 11.3 ± 8.8	1
Haddad <i>et al.</i> ³³ 2017	Single centre 93 (45 vs. 48)	Luminor 14 iVascular Spain	3.0 µg / mm ² Organic ester	100.0	Infrapopliteal NA	1
SINGA-PACLI ³⁵ Tan <i>et al.</i> 2019	Multicentre 138 (70 vs. 68)	Passeo-18 Lux Biotronik	3.0 µg / mm ² BTHC	100.0	Infrapopliteal 9.0 ± 7.4	1

Continued

Table 1-continued						
Study*, authors and year	Design and patients (limbs) sample	Paclitaxel coated balloon tested	Paclitaxel dosage and excipient	Baseline CLI diagnosis – %	Lesion anatomy and length – cm	Available follow up period – y
ACOART-II ³⁴ Jia <i>et al.</i> 2020	Multicentre 120 (61 vs. 59)	Litos AcoTec Scientific	3.0 µg / mm ² Magnesium stearate	99.0	Infrapopliteal 17.0 ± 8.6	1
LUTONIX-BTK ^{27,69} Mustapha <i>et al.</i> 2019	Multicentre 442 (287 vs. 155)	Lutonix (Bard) BD	2.0 µg / mm ² Polysorbate and sorbitol	90.5	Infrapopliteal 11.2 ± 9.3	2

BTHC = butyryl-trihexyl-citrate.

* All included randomised controlled trials tested paclitaxel coated balloons for treatment of peripheral arterial disease. In the DRECOREST-I trial, paclitaxel drug coated balloons (DCB) were randomised vs. plain balloon angioplasty for failing bypass surgery. In the COPA-CABANA randomised study, DCB were investigated for treatment of in stent restenosis and the non-randomised double dose cohort for recurrent in stent restenosis was excluded. The DEBELLUM study randomised both femoropopliteal and infrapopliteal lesions. In the PACUS trial, DCB were randomised vs. a combination of high frequency low intensity intravascular ultrasound therapy and contrast dissolved liquid paclitaxel (1.0 µg / mm³) delivered in the femoropopliteal treatment area under distal balloon occlusion and aspirated with a 50 mL syringe after 60 sec. Total dose of liquid paclitaxel in the control arm was accounted for in the multivariable dose response meta-analysis. In the RAPID study, DCB was combined with a biomimetic stent (SUPERA) and randomised vs. the stent (SUPERA) alone.

differences in follow up period and number of participants who either died or were lost to follow up (LTFU), the primary endpoint was summarised on the log hazard scale as recommended for time to event outcomes.¹⁸ Study specific hazard ratios (HR) and respective variances were sourced from individual publications or calculated from published Kaplan–Meier curves and survival tables by applying the methods of Tierney *et al.*¹⁹ and Guyot *et al.*²⁰ for extraction of individual time to event patient outcomes. The latter have shown high reproducibility and excellent accuracy for calculation of survival probabilities and HRs. For missing or incomplete data, the principal investigators were contacted, and individual patient time to event data were requested. Examples of time to event analyses are given in the Supplementary material (Fig. S1).

Summary statistics were expressed as HRs and the associated 95% confidence intervals (CI). One and two stage models were employed for the current meta-analysis.²¹ Number needed to harm (NNH) was calculated in case of significant findings at the end of the reported follow up period. Hazard functions of major amputations were pooled with a fixed effects model in the absence of significant statistical heterogeneity. A stratified Cox model with a random effect for each trial was applied in case of the one stage patient level model,²² whereas an inverse variance weighting method was used for the two stage trial level model.¹⁸ To address the risk of informative censoring, bootstrap multiple imputation methods were used to impute censored failure times from the predictive distribution of the observed failure times.¹⁵ A total of $n = 100$ datasets were imputed and Rubin's rules were applied to pool parameter estimates after fitting a one stage stratified Cox model in each of the imputed datasets. For the dose response meta-analysis, a one stage random effects model was applied with restricted maximum likelihood using trial level summary effects on the log hazard scale.¹⁷ In case of the dose response model, a restricted cubic spline model with three knots located at the 10th, 50th, and 90th

percentiles was fitted because splines are more advantageous over conventional non-linear models.²³ The level of statistical significance was set at $\alpha = .05$.

RESULTS

The literature search yielded 4 395 articles eligible for further analysis. Of those, 857 publications were considered for inclusion based on their title and abstract. Finally, 51 items reporting the results of 40 RCTs in total were included for further in depth full text analysis after excluding studies that did not meet the predefined inclusion criteria (PRISMA selection process in Fig. 1). Design characteristics of tested devices are outlined in Table S1. Nineteen RCTs reported zero events of major amputations in both study arms and were excluded from further numerical analysis (Table S2). In

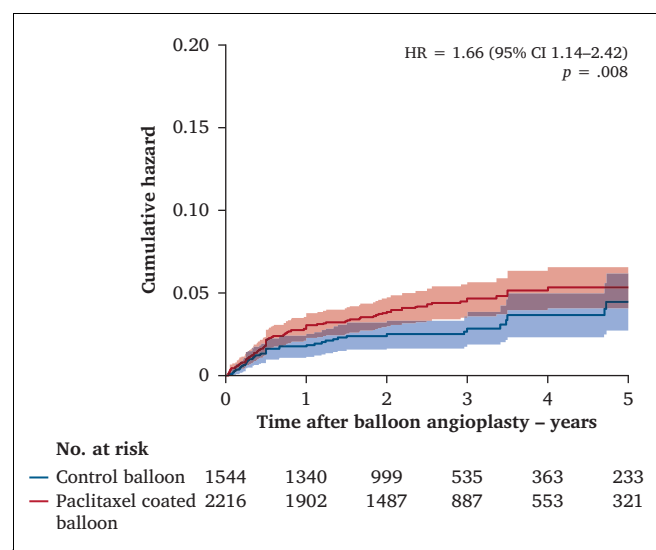


Figure 2. Cumulative hazard functions (time to event) of major amputations in the two treatment arms of paclitaxel coated balloon and of control balloon in patients with peripheral arterial disease. A one stage proportional hazards Cox model stratified at trial level (random effect) was applied.

all, 21 RCTs with 3 760 lower limbs were eventually included in the quantitative evidence synthesis. The primary characteristics of the 21 selected RCTs are outlined in Table 1.

Out of the 21 RCTs, four studies with 1 375 cases tested a 2.0 µg/mm² paclitaxel coated balloon,^{24–27} 10 studies with 1 260 patients tested a variety of 3.0 µg/mm² paclitaxel coated balloon catheters,^{18,28–39} and seven studies with 1 125 patients investigated the highest 3.5 µg/mm² paclitaxel coating technology.^{40–46} Paclitaxel coated balloons were used in the femoropopliteal arteries in 13 studies with 2 323 lower limbs, in the infrapopliteal arteries in seven studies with 1 366 limbs, whereas one study with 71 limbs enrolled both the femoropopliteal and infrapopliteal segments.⁴³ There was a largely balanced distribution of baseline patient and lesion characteristics across all studies as described in detail in previously published meta-analyses. Overall, mean patient age ranged between 67 and 76 years, randomised subjects were predominantly males, and the most prevalent risk factors included smoking, diabetes, hypertension, and hyperlipidaemia.^{2,7,47}

The enrolled patient population encompassed 1 972 lower limbs (52%) suffering from short distance intermittent claudication and 1 788 limbs presenting with CLI (48%). A wide

range of lesions was treated with a weighted average lesion length of 10 cm (Table 1). The median RCT follow up period was two years (range 0.5–5 years). Of 21 RCTs, 16 studies were designed as randomised multicentre trials and five as single centre trials.^{33,40,43–45} Overall risk of bias was mostly low to moderate for all included trials. Randomisation and allocation concealment were performed adequately in most cases and there was low risk of outcome data missingness or selective data reporting. There were some concerns about performance bias in all studies because none of them was executed in a double blind fashion. This was reflected accordingly in the second domain of the RoB-2 tool (Fig. S2; revised Cochrane Risk of Bias tool).

Major amputations

In all, 21 RCTs reported 128 events in 3 760 lower limbs after a median individual patient follow up period of two years (max. five years). There were 87 major amputations of 2 216 limbs in the paclitaxel arms (4.0% crude risk) compared with 41 major amputations in 1 544 limbs in the control arms (2.7% crude risk). Application of paclitaxel coated balloons was associated with a significantly higher risk of major amputation with a pooled HR of 1.66 (95% CI

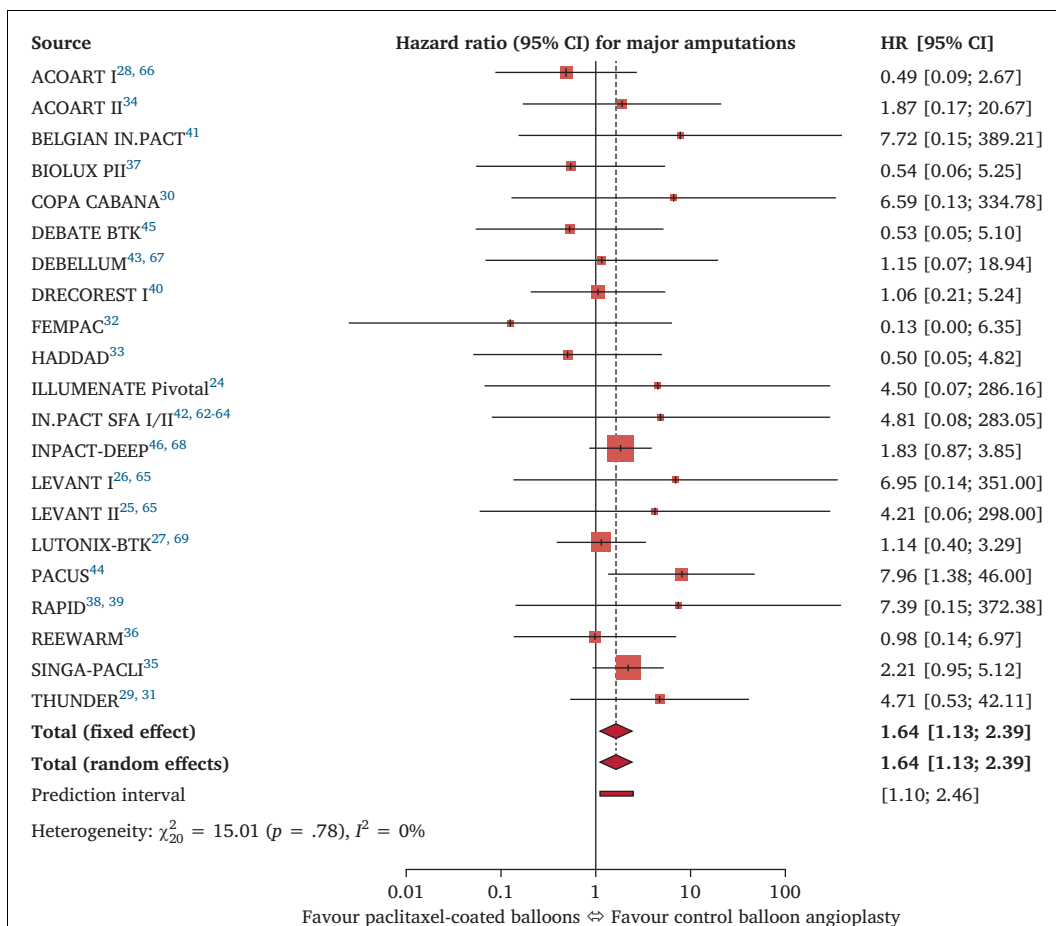


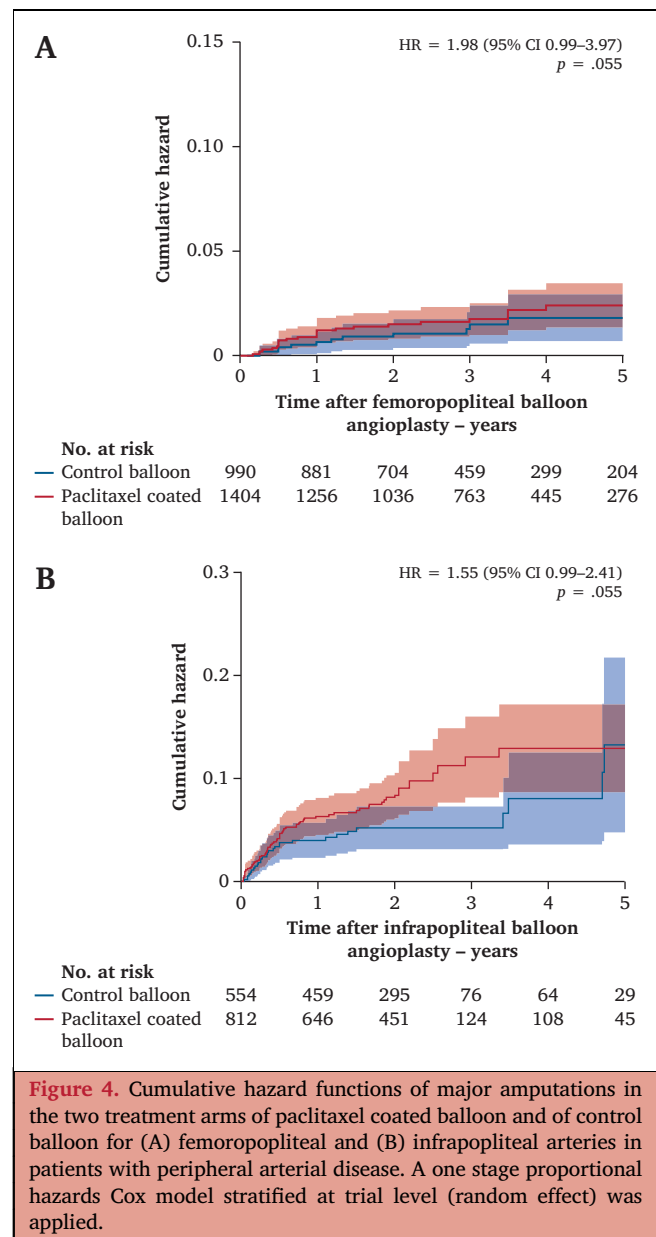
Figure 3. Forest plot of the two stage meta-analysis of trial level hazard ratios (HR) for major amputations of paclitaxel coated balloon versus control balloon angioplasty in patients with peripheral arterial disease. HRs were pooled with inverse variance weighting. There was no significant heterogeneity. Fixed effect and random effects models are shown. CI = confidence interval.

1.14 – 2.42; $p = .008$, one stage stratified Cox model). Cumulative hazard functions in the two treatment arms are shown in Fig. 2. The prediction interval for the two stage model was 95% CI 1.10 – 2.46 (Fig. 3). There was no significant statistical heterogeneity between studies ($I^2 = 0\%$, $p = .77$). In subgroup analyses, the observed amputation risk was consistent for both femoropopliteal ($p = .055$) and infrapopliteal ($p = .055$) vessels (Fig. 4). Eleven of the 21 RCTs enrolled predominantly CLI patients. The crude amputation risk in CLI trials was 7.2% (74 events of 1 022 limbs) in case of paclitaxel coated treatment vs. 4.7% (36 events of 766 limbs) in controls. The risk of major amputation was significant in trials including mostly CLI patients (HR 1.56, 95% CI 1.04 – 2.33; $p = .03$), but not in trials enlisting intermittent claudication patients (HR 2.47, 95% CI 0.87 – 6.97; $p = .088$) (Fig. 5). The corresponding NNH for CLI was 35.

In the dose response meta-analysis, a significant dose dependent association between peri-procedural paclitaxel coated balloon exposure and risk of major amputation was detected (Fig. 6). In the log linear model, there was a significantly higher relative risk of major amputation by 1.12 times per every paclitaxel milligram delivered (95% CI 1.04 – 1.21, $p = .003$) without any significant heterogeneity across studies ($I^2 = 0\%$, $p = .87$). Because of evidence of departure from linearity (Wald test $p = .007$ of regression coefficients) and improved goodness of fit, a non-linear restricted cubic spline model is presented instead (Fig. 6). Amputation risk was accelerated over increasing paclitaxel dose. Predicted amputation risk was 1.7 times higher (95% CI 1.09 – 2.53) at the 5 mg paclitaxel exposure level and 4.4 times higher (95% CI 1.59 – 12.1) at the 10 mg exposure level (chi-square model $p = .007$). Findings of the accelerated dose response gradient were very similar with and without the treated lesion length correction factor (Dose response section, Supplementary material).

In the sensitivity tests, the pooled HR was congruent across leave one out meta-analysis without any influential studies (Table S3). Combinatorial meta-analysis showed a homogeneous set of studies without any outliers or influential clusters, and absence of between study statistical heterogeneity. The pooled estimate demonstrated a symmetric, unimodal distribution indicative of treatment effect homogeneity (Fig. 7). Different statistical models produced similar results with little variation in the magnitude and precision of the observed effect size (Table S4). For multi-centre trials only, the calculated HR was 1.71 (95% CI 1.13 – 2.59; $p = .011$). Reported rates of dropout and consent withdrawal were low and similar between the paclitaxel and control groups (7.6 vs. 7.3%, $p = .71$; Table S5). Pooled multiple imputed HR was 1.69 (95% CI 1.18 – 2.41, $p = .004$).

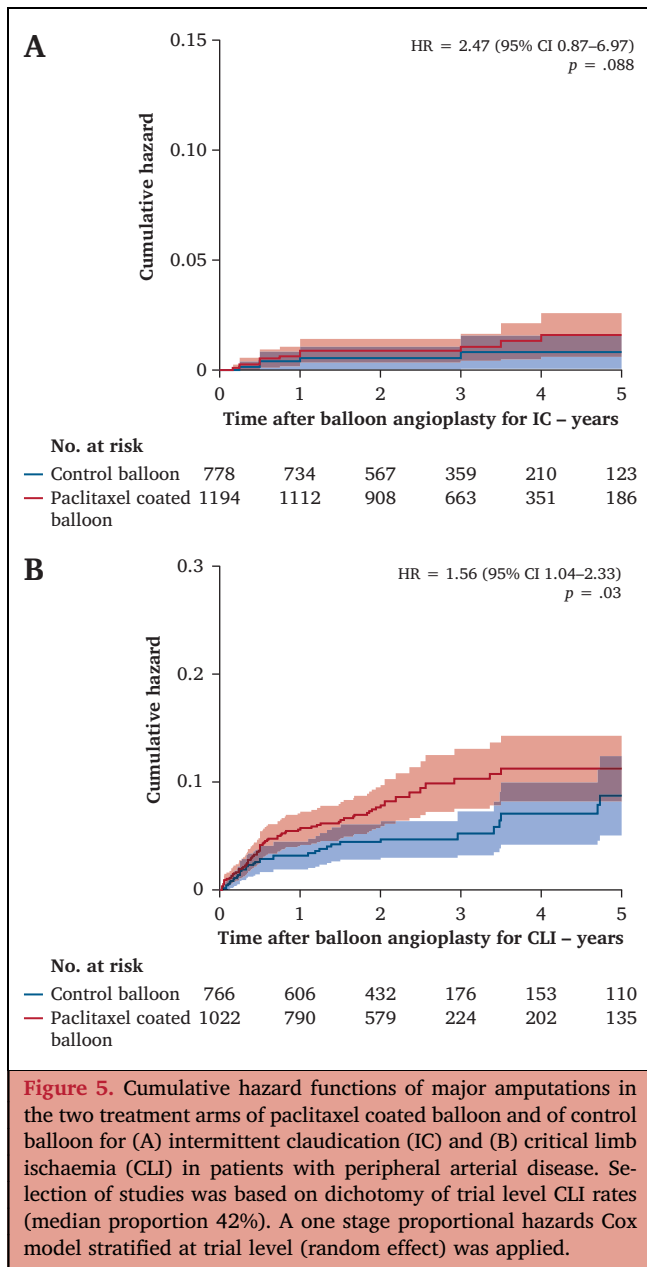
Subanalyses of different paclitaxel dose densities were numerically consistent but exhibited wide confidence intervals and only the higher $3.5 \mu\text{g}/\text{mm}^2$ dose platform reached the level of statistical significance with an HR of 1.92 (95% CI 1.06 – 3.48; $p = .033$, Fig. S3). Leaving one excipient out meta-analysis confirmed also that the



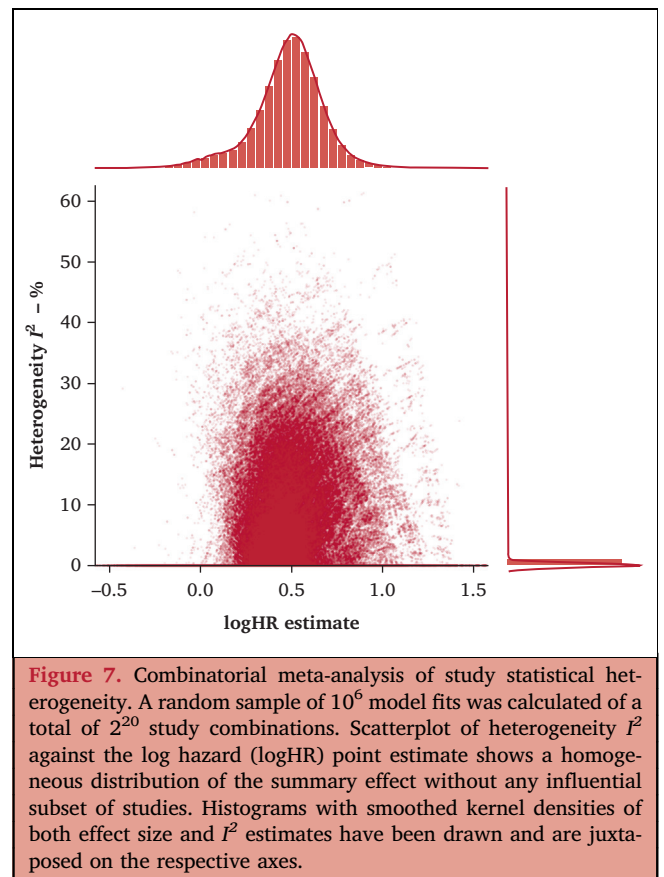
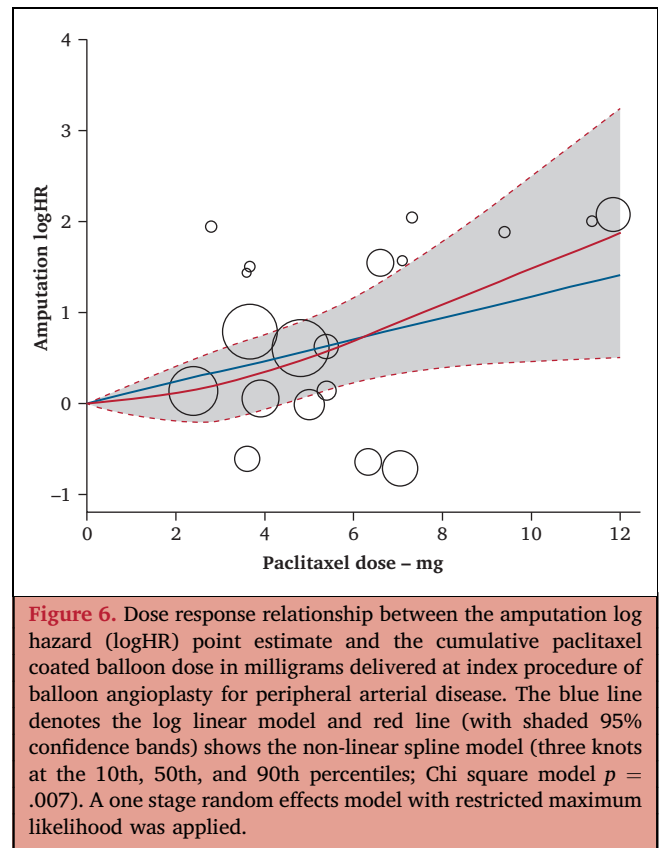
observed effect was dominated by the higher $3.5 \mu\text{g}/\text{mm}^2$ – Urea design (Table S4). There was no visual asymmetry of the funnel plot to suggest publication bias (Egger’s test = 0.09; $p = .80$; Figs S4 and S5). Level of certainty in evidence was downrated from high to moderate because of sparse events in some studies implying imprecision. Complete numerical results are provided in detail in the Supplementary material (Table S6).

DISCUSSION

Concerns have been raised about the long term risk of all cause death using paclitaxel coated devices in the peripheral arteries. Study level meta-analyses have demonstrated a statistically significant higher long term risk of death associated with the application of paclitaxel coated devices in the femoropopliteal artery.^{2,47} The United States Federal Drug Agency (FDA) conducted internal meta-



analyses of industry sponsored RCTs and corroborated the presence of an inexplicable late mortality signal.⁴⁸ Ultimately, an individual patient data meta-analysis of eight FDA approved paclitaxel coated devices (paclitaxel balloons and stents) observed a significant 4.6% absolute increased long term mortality risk associated with paclitaxel coated device use compared with balloon angioplasty.³ In parallel, results of a multitude of observational real world studies, mostly in the form of retrospective analyses of administrative patient records and reimbursement claims in the United States and in Germany, have produced conflicting results claiming adequate safety and occasionally some survival benefit associated with paclitaxel use in peripheral vascular disease.^{4,5,49,50} A recent interim report from the SWEDEPAD registry RCT did not show an overall mortality



difference, but 2.0 $\mu\text{g}/\text{mm}^2$ paclitaxel coated balloons were used in 41% of the cases. Long term HR was 1.18 (95% CI 0.72 – 1.93) for intermittent claudication, which is similar to the non-significant point estimate reported by Katsanos *et al.* for the low dose devices (RR 1.27, 95% CI 0.70 – 2.32).²

To the present authors' knowledge, this analysis is the first to document a statistically significant higher long term risk of major amputation associated with the application of paclitaxel coated balloons in the peripheral arteries. The summary effect demonstrated a 66% higher relative risk of major amputation in the paclitaxel coated treated limbs. In particular, the finding affected mostly the CLI population with a NNH of 35. In addition, there was good evidence of a significant non-linear dose response relationship with accelerated risk per cumulative paclitaxel dose. The results showed a consistent and homogeneous signal of potential harm for both femoropopliteal and infrapopliteal vessels. These findings are particularly worrisome considering that there is already widespread use of several paclitaxel coated balloon catheters, especially in higher risk peripheral vascular patients per the latest FDA guidance letter.⁵¹ A previous meta-analysis also raised concerns about poorer amputation free survival (composite endpoint of death and major amputation) using paclitaxel coated balloons in the infrapopliteal arteries.⁷ Interestingly, real world outcomes in the German population (Barmer Health Insurance claims) reported numerically higher five year rates of limb loss in the femoropopliteal segment for intermittent claudication (1.0 vs. 0.8%) and in the infrapopliteal segment for CLI treatment (7.6 vs. 6.5%) for paclitaxel devices (propensity matched comparisons) contrary to the claimed survival benefit.^{49,50}

Certainly, all paclitaxel coated balloon catheters suffer from distal embolisation of significant amounts of paclitaxel particulate material when inflated in the circulatory system.⁵² It has been long shown that less than 10% of the paclitaxel load is being transferred to the treated vessel wall in case of drug coated balloon catheters and as much as 90% escapes into the distal circulation.^{53,54} Hence, downstream showers of cytotoxic solid state paclitaxel material combined with its long lasting tissue residence remains the most likely hypothesis for the herein noted increased risk of amputation. Tissue absorption of solid state paclitaxel is far lower than the rate of tissue metabolic clearance, resulting in local presence of the drug for several months. Consequently, long term tissue bioavailability of paclitaxel depends more on its low solubility (i.e., anhydrous and dihydrate less soluble than amorphous) and the total amount of paclitaxel delivered during the index procedure.⁵⁵ Furthermore, time scale numerical analyses support the notion that paclitaxel tissue retention is governed by an intricate interplay of paclitaxel crystallinity, coating/excipient dissolution kinetics, saturation levels of local tissue binding sites, and diffusion barriers potentially imposed by atherosclerosis.⁵⁶ For example, calcified plaque material may impede diffusion of paclitaxel up to 100 fold compared with preclinical observations in healthy animal experiments.⁵⁵

Overall, paclitaxel pharmacokinetics appear to be multi-phasic and non-linear leading to long lasting tissue residence with unknown long term biological effects. In the literature, there are scarce reports of vascular fibrinoid necrosis, aneurysmal degeneration, small vessel inflammation, and focal downstream skeletal muscle necrosis as the most likely result of local paclitaxel toxicity.^{57,58} Hence, the present authors believe that systemic release and downstream embolisation of cytotoxic paclitaxel particles in combination with the underlying ischaemia and inflammation in the case of CLI is the most likely explanation for the noted risk of amputation. Of note, the present findings relate only to paclitaxel coated balloon catheters. On the contrary, in the PADI trial, use of coronary polymer coated paclitaxel eluting stents in the infrapopliteal arteries have been shown to be effective in reducing major amputations at five years and safe at 10 years of follow up.⁵⁹ Considerations of major differences in the total paclitaxel dose (more than an order of magnitude less in case of coronary paclitaxel eluting stents compared with DCBs) and release kinetics (polymer controlled sustained release vs. acute balloon burst) lend weight to the primary hypothesis of downstream paclitaxel particulate showers as the main reason of the observed higher risk of major amputations using paclitaxel coated balloons in the peripheral arteries.

Intersociety guidelines published in 2017 on the management of peripheral vascular disease have recommended paclitaxel coated balloons and stents for short femoropopliteal lesions (< 25 cm; recommendation class IIb);⁶⁰ however, the updated 2019 Global Vascular Guidelines (GVG) noted the identified mortality risk for intermittent claudication and the ongoing investigations of regulatory bodies and independent research teams to further clarify those concerns (Addendum).⁶¹ Considering the present findings, the authors agree with the recommendation of the GVG steering committee that appropriately powered and controlled clinical studies need to continue investigating the risks and benefits of different paclitaxel coated devices for critical limb ischaemia treatments. However, caution and consideration of the potential mortality and herein presented amputation risks must be exercised outside the setting of clinical trials.^{2,7}

The present work has several limitations. First, some RCTs did not report any major amputations in either arm (mostly claudicants with one year follow up), whereas some of the 21 analysed RCTs reported sparse events, and this may have given rise to imprecision. Therefore, certainty of evidence was downrated from high to moderate regardless of the positive dose response association. Patient level time to event data were extracted and analysed with a one stage model to increase power and precision and there was also consistent size and direction of the summary effect in the various subgroup and sensitivity tests (leave one out, multicentre, and different fitted models), but still, the reported amputation risk may be driven by sampling errors or even pure chance considering the overall low event rates. In addition, the low dose balloons appeared to be safe, but this may be because of the small number of events and lack of adequate statistical power to detect a true effect. Second,

good evidence was found of a biological gradient and the risk of amputation was potentiated in the 3.5 µg/mm² subset of studies using the IN.PACT technology with urea excipient that remains widely used in the femoropopliteal segment. Certainly, considering differences in paclitaxel crystallinity and excipient formulation across different balloon platforms, the presented dose response meta-analysis is probably rudimentary and could not account for variations of tissue bioavailability across different devices. Future trials should include larger sample sizes and be adequately powered to detect potential differences of major amputations between uncoated and coated balloons, or even between different paclitaxel coated balloon designs (dosages and/or excipients). Third, other sources of clinical heterogeneity and potential variable interactions could not be explored in the absence of individual patient covariates. It is likely that different dose and excipient combinations may produce different clinical results. Fourth, amputation rates constituted a secondary safety endpoint in all studies and the actual clinical indications to perform a major amputation were not reported in the studies to help distinguish between infectious, ischaemic, or neuropathic causes of major limb loss. Finally, included RCTs were published over a period of more than a decade, none of them was powered for limb salvage outcomes, and improvements in general medical management or in the design of newer paclitaxel coated balloon platforms over time could not be accounted for.

In conclusion, there appears to be heightened risk of major amputation after paclitaxel coated balloon application in the femoropopliteal and infrapopliteal arteries, especially in the setting of critical limb ischaemia. Downstream embolisation of cytotoxic paclitaxel particulate material would be the most likely explanation. Considering the widespread use of those devices in high risk vascular patients, this observation needs to be urgently refuted within the context of properly designed randomised studies.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

All authors have completed the ICMJE uniform disclosure. KK reports research grants from Abbott, Rontis, and Medalliance, and personal fees from Concept Medical outside the submitted work. PK reports personal fees from BD outside the submitted work. CG reports grants from Boston Scientific and Penumbra Inc. outside the submitted work. UT reports grants from iVascular and Concept Medical outside the submitted work. DK reports grants from BD and RONTIS outside the submitted work. MK, SS, SB, PB, and TB have nothing to disclose.

FUNDING

None.

APPENDIX A. SUPPLEMENTARY DATA

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejvs.2021.05.027>.

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