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C-reactive protein point-of-care testing for safely reducing antibiotics for acute exacerbations of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease: the PACE RCT

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Abstract

C-reactive protein point-of-care testing for safely reducing antibiotics for acute exacerbations of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease: the PACE RCT

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Background: Most patients presenting with acute exacerbations of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (AECOPD) in primary care are prescribed antibiotics, but these may not be beneficial, and they can cause side effects and increase the risk of subsequent resistant infections. Point-of-care tests (POCTs) could safely reduce inappropriate antibiotic prescribing and antimicrobial resistance.

Objective: To determine whether or not the use of a C-reactive protein (CRP) POCT to guide prescribing decisions for AECOPD reduces antibiotic consumption without having a negative impact on chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) health status and is cost-effective.

Design: A multicentre, parallel-arm, randomised controlled open trial with an embedded process, and a health economic evaluation.

Setting: General practices in Wales and England. A UK NHS perspective was used for the economic analysis.

Participants: Adults (aged ≥ 40 years) with a primary care diagnosis of COPD, presenting with an AECOPD (with at least one of increased dyspnoea, increased sputum volume and increased sputum purulence) of between 24 hours' and 21 days' duration.

Intervention: CRP POCTs to guide antibiotic prescribing decisions for AECOPD, compared with usual care (no CRP POCT), using remote online randomisation.

Main outcome measures: Patient-reported antibiotic consumption for AECOPD within 4 weeks post randomisation and COPD health status as measured with the Clinical COPD Questionnaire (CCQ) at 2 weeks. For the economic evaluation, patient-reported resource use and the EuroQol-5 Dimensions were included.

Results: In total, 653 participants were randomised from 86 general practices. Three withdrew consent and one was randomised in error, leaving 324 participants in the usual-care arm and 325 participants in the CRP POCT arm. Antibiotics were consumed for AECOPD by 212 out of 274 participants (77.4%) and 150 out of 263 participants (57.0%) in the usual-care and CRP POCT arm, respectively [adjusted odds ratio 0.31, 95% confidence interval (CI) 0.20 to 0.47]. The CCQ analysis comprised 282 and 281 participants in the usual-care and CRP POCT arms, respectively, and the adjusted mean CCQ score difference at 2 weeks was 0.19 points (two-sided 90% CI -0.33 to -0.05 points). The upper limit of the CI did not contain the prespecified non-inferiority margin of 0.3. The total cost from a NHS perspective at 4 weeks was £17.59 per patient higher in the CRP POCT arm (95% CI $-\text{£}34.80$ to $\text{£}69.98$; $p = 0.408$). The mean incremental cost-effectiveness ratios were £222 per 1% reduction in antibiotic consumption compared with usual care at 4 weeks and £15,251 per quality-adjusted life-year gained at 6 months with no significant changes in sensitivity analyses. Patients and clinicians were generally supportive of including CRP POCT in the assessment of AECOPD.

Conclusions: A CRP POCT diagnostic strategy achieved meaningful reductions in patient-reported antibiotic consumption without impairing COPD health status or increasing costs. There were no associated harms and both patients and clinicians valued the diagnostic strategy.

Future work: Implementation studies that also build on our qualitative findings could help determine the effect of this intervention over the longer term.

Trial registration: Current Controlled Trials ISRCTN24346473.

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Contents

List of tables	xiii
List of figures	xvii
List of boxes	xix
List of supplementary material	xxi
List of abbreviations	xxiii
Plain English summary	xxv
Scientific summary	xxvii
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Background	1
Antibiotic use	1
C-reactive protein	2
The PACE randomised controlled trial: overall aim	3
Chapter 2 Clinical effectiveness methods	5
Summary of trial design	5
Clinical effectiveness objectives	5
<i>Primary objective</i>	5
<i>Secondary objectives</i>	5
Internal pilot	6
Participants	6
Trial interventions	6
<i>Intervention arm (C-reactive protein point-of-care test)</i>	6
<i>Control arm (usual care)</i>	9
Data collection	9
<i>Baseline appointment</i>	9
<i>Follow-up data collection</i>	11
<i>1- and 2-week telephone follow-up</i>	11
<i>4-week face-to-face visit</i>	11
<i>Collection of relevant data from electronic medical records at 6 months</i>	11
<i>Patient self-reported Chronic Respiratory Disease Questionnaire Self-Administered Standardized and EuroQol 5-Dimensions, five-level version at 6 months</i>	11
<i>Adverse events</i>	11
<i>Microbiological assessment</i>	11
Outcome measures	12
<i>Sample size</i>	13
<i>Randomisation</i>	13
<i>Statistical methods</i>	13
<i>Primary analysis</i>	14
<i>Secondary analysis</i>	14
<i>Subgroup analysis</i>	14
<i>Sensitivity analysis</i>	14
<i>Patient and public involvement</i>	15
Ethics approval and governance	15

Chapter 3 Clinical effectiveness results	17
Recruitment and participant flow	17
Baseline data	18
Sputum bacteriological and virological profiles at baseline	18
Distribution of C-reactive protein values	26
Outcomes and estimation	26
<i>Co-primary outcomes</i>	26
Secondary outcomes	27
<i>Medication use</i>	27
<i>Potential medication side effects, consultations with primary/secondary care and pneumonia diagnoses</i>	28
<i>Patient-reported outcome measures</i>	28
Sputum microbiology profile and outcomes at 4 weeks post randomisation	31
Sensitivity analyses	31
Subgroup analyses	33
Adverse events	35
Chapter 4 Qualitative process evaluation	37
Aim	37
Methods	37
<i>Setting and participants</i>	37
<i>Procedure</i>	37
<i>Analysis</i>	37
Results	38
<i>Acceptability</i>	38
Implementation of the C-reactive protein point-of-care test	40
<i>Technical aspects of the test</i>	40
<i>Views about roll-out in routine practice</i>	41
Mechanisms of impact of the C-reactive protein point-of-care test	42
<i>The C-reactive protein point-of-care test as an objective sign of illness</i>	42
<i>The C-reactive protein point-of-care test as a patient education tool</i>	43
<i>Use of the C-reactive protein point-of-care test to reinforce prescribers' decisions</i>	43
Contextual factors	44
<i>Attitudes towards antibiotics</i>	44
<i>Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease routine care pathway</i>	45
Qualitative evaluation summary	46
Conclusions	47
Chapter 5 Health economics	49
Introduction	49
Methods	49
<i>Costs included in the health economic analysis</i>	49
<i>C-reactive protein point-of-care test costs</i>	49
<i>Cost of medication prescribed for the treatment of acute exacerbations of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease</i>	50
<i>Cost of health-care resource use</i>	50
<i>Cost of work lost as a result of acute exacerbations of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease</i>	50
<i>Cost-effectiveness analysis</i>	51
<i>Cost-utility analysis</i>	51
<i>Sensitivity analyses</i>	51
<i>Cost-consequences analysis</i>	52
<i>Budget impact analysis</i>	52

Results	53
<i>C-reactive protein point-of-care test costs</i>	53
<i>Cost of medication prescribed for treatment of acute exacerbations of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease</i>	54
<i>Antibiotics</i>	54
<i>Oral corticosteroids</i>	55
<i>Inhaled medications</i>	56
<i>Cost of health-care resource use</i>	56
<i>Primary care costs</i>	56
<i>Secondary care costs</i>	58
<i>Total costs at 4 weeks and 6 months</i>	58
<i>Cost of work lost due to acute exacerbations of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease</i>	60
<i>Cost-effectiveness analysis</i>	60
<i>Sensitivity analyses</i>	61
<i>Cost-utility analysis</i>	62
<i>Sensitivity analyses</i>	62
<i>Cost-consequences analysis</i>	65
<i>Budget impact analysis</i>	65
<i>Sensitivity analysis</i>	66
Summary	67
Chapter 6 Discussion	69
Strengths and limitations	69
Generalisability	70
Interpretation and comparison with other literature	70
Impact of patient and public involvement	72
Implications for clinical practice and future research	73
Conclusions	73
Acknowledgements	75
References	79
Appendix 1 Clinical effectiveness methods	87
Appendix 2 Clinical effectiveness results	93
Appendix 3 Health economics	101

List of tables

TABLE 1 Baseline and follow-up data collected	10
TABLE 2 Participant recruitment and site participation across recruitment centres	17
TABLE 3 Participant characteristics at baseline (1 of 2)	19
TABLE 4 Participant characteristics at baseline (2 of 2)	20
TABLE 5 Participant lung function parameters at baseline	22
TABLE 6 Antibiotic resistance in the most common potential pathogens cultured from sputum samples at baseline	24
TABLE 7 Between-arm comparison of antibiotic consumption for AECOPD during the 4 weeks post randomisation	26
TABLE 8 Between-arm comparison of CCQ at 2 weeks post randomisation	27
TABLE 9 Between-arm comparisons of secondary outcome measures related to medication prescription or use	28
TABLE 10 Between-arm comparisons of CCQ scores over time	29
TABLE 11 Between-arm comparisons of EQ-5D scores over time	30
TABLE 12 Between-arm comparison of CRQ-SAS domains at 6 months post randomisation	30
TABLE 13 Between-arm comparisons of sputum microbiology outcome (percentage of antibiotics to which at least one cultured, potentially pathogenic bacteria from sputum was resistant at 4 weeks)	32
TABLE 14 Resistance to antibiotics in commensal bacteria detected from throat swabs at baseline (expressed as percentage of total bacterial load that grew on each antibiotic plate)	32
TABLE 15 Between-arm comparisons of throat swab bacteriology outcomes (percentage of total bacteria load from throat swabs that grew on the antibiotic plate at 4 weeks)	33
TABLE 16 Subgroup analyses for antibiotic consumption for AECOPD within 4 weeks post randomisation (primary outcome)	34
TABLE 17 Characteristics of qualitative evaluation participants	38
TABLE 18 Summary of key themes from the framework analysis of qualitative data	39
TABLE 19 Cost components and total testing cost of CRP POCT in primary care	53

TABLE 20 Cost of antibiotics, oral steroids, inhaled medications and all medications at baseline and 6-month follow-up	55
TABLE 21 Cost of primary care resources used in the 4-week follow-up and 6-month review periods	57
TABLE 22 Cost of primary care resources used in the 6-month review period related to COPD	57
TABLE 23 Secondary care resources used per patient in the trial follow-up period	58
TABLE 24 Cost of secondary care resources used per patient in the trial follow-up period	59
TABLE 25 Results of the deterministic sensitivity analyses and scenario analyses on the primary base-case cost-effectiveness analysis results	61
TABLE 26 Results of the deterministic sensitivity analyses and scenario analyses on the base-case CUA results	62
TABLE 27 Results of the deterministic sensitivity analyses on the ITT CUA results (following multiple imputation)	64
TABLE 28 Clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness outcomes: cost-consequences analysis	65
TABLE 29 Estimated costs associated with the use of CRP testing for COPD in primary care in the UK	66
TABLE 30 Summary of outcomes and changes to the outcomes	87
TABLE 31 Summary of changes to study inclusion criteria following the internal pilot	88
TABLE 32 Pilot study: eligibility criteria	89
TABLE 33 Main study: eligibility criteria	89
TABLE 34 Interpretation of CRP results	90
TABLE 35 Protocol changes	90
TABLE 36 Adjusted primary antibiotic analysis for missing data	93
TABLE 37 Adjusted primary CCQ analysis for missing data	93
TABLE 38 Descriptive statistics for CCQ total score at 2 weeks post randomisation for participants who are included in the MITT analysis	93
TABLE 39 Best- and worst-case scenarios for missing primary antibiotic consumption for AECOPD data	94
TABLE 40 Between-arm comparison of antibiotics consumed for AECOPD during the first 4 weeks post randomisation, adjusting for change in eligibility	95

TABLE 41 Between-arm comparison of CCQ total score at 2 weeks post randomisation, adjusting for change in eligibility	95
TABLE 42 Primary antibiotic analysis for per-protocol analysis population	95
TABLE 43 Primary CCQ analysis for per-protocol analysis population	95
TABLE 44 Antibiotics consumed for AECOPD over time	96
TABLE 45 Antibiotics consumed for any reason over time	97
TABLE 46 Use of other COPD treatments over time	97
TABLE 47 Rates of primary and secondary care consultations during the 6 months post randomisation	99
TABLE 48 Subgroup analyses for antibiotic consumption for CCQ total score at 2 weeks post randomisation (primary outcome)	100
TABLE 49 Unit costs of antibiotics and oral corticosteroids included in costing for the health economic evaluation	101
TABLE 50 Unit costs of inhaled medication included in costing for the health economic evaluation	102
TABLE 51 Unit costs of health-care resources included in costing for the health economic evaluation	104
TABLE 52 Total medication costs recorded for the CRP POCT and control arms during the trial follow-up period	107
TABLE 53 Total primary care costs recorded for the CRP POCT and control arms for any reason during the trial follow-up period	107
TABLE 54 Total secondary care costs recorded for the CRP POCT and control arms during the trial follow-up period	108

List of figures

FIGURE 1 Participant flow diagram	7
FIGURE 2 The Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials (CONSORT) flow diagram	18
FIGURE 3 Potential bacterial pathogens from sputum samples at baseline	23
FIGURE 4 Viral and atypical pathogens from sputum samples at baseline	25
FIGURE 5 Dot plot of CRP levels	26
FIGURE 6 Differential effect of the intervention on the use of antibiotics during the first 4 weeks	35
FIGURE 7 Costs accrued in the first 4 weeks of follow-up (including baseline but excluding medication costs between baseline and 4 weeks because of a lack of data)	59
FIGURE 8 Costs accrued for any condition in the 6-month review period (including baseline costs)	60
FIGURE 9 Total costs during study period for CRP POCT and control arm, respectively	60
FIGURE 10 Cost-effectiveness plane (MITT analysis) for the base case (incremental cost per percentage reduction in antibiotic consumption)	61
FIGURE 11 Cost-effectiveness acceptability curve for base-case cost-effectiveness analysis	62
FIGURE 12 Cost-effectiveness plane (MITT analysis) for the base-case CUA (incremental cost per QALY gained)	63
FIGURE 13 Cost-effectiveness acceptability curve (MITT analysis) for the base-case CUA (incremental cost per QALY gained)	63
FIGURE 14 Cost-effectiveness plane (ITT analysis using multiple imputation) for the secondary CUA (incremental cost per QALY gained)	64
FIGURE 15 Cost-effectiveness acceptability curve (ITT analysis using multiple imputation) for the secondary CUA (incremental cost per QALY gained)	65
FIGURE 16 Impact of different missing data assumptions on the findings of the primary CCQ analysis	94
FIGURE 17 Predicted probabilities of antibiotic consumption for AECOPD over time, by trial arm	96
FIGURE 18 Use of other COPD treatments over time	98
FIGURE 19 Distribution of number of primary care consultations by arm	98
FIGURE 20 Distribution of number of secondary care consultations by arm	99

List of boxes

BOX 1 Guidance for interpreting CRP results

8

List of supplementary material

Report Supplementary Material 1 Guidance and training information provided to participating sites

Report Supplementary Material 2 The PACE study: qualitative topic guides

Supplementary material can be found on the NIHR Journals Library report page (<https://doi.org/10.3310/hta24150>).

Supplementary material has been provided by the authors to support the report and any files provided at submission will have been seen by peer reviewers, but not extensively reviewed. Any supplementary material provided at a later stage in the process may not have been peer reviewed.

List of abbreviations

A&E	accident and emergency	GOLD	Global Initiative for Chronic Obstructive Lung Disease
AE	adverse event	GP	general practitioner
AECOPD	acute exacerbation of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease	HRQoL	health-related quality of life
AMD	adjusted mean difference	ICER	incremental cost-effectiveness ratio
AOR	adjusted odds ratio	IQR	interquartile range
CACE	complier average causal effect	ITT	intention to treat
CCQ	Clinical COPD Questionnaire	LRTI	lower respiratory tract infection
CI	confidence interval	MITT	modified intention to treat
COPD	chronic obstructive pulmonary disease	NICE	National Institute for Health and Care Excellence
CRF	case report form	NIHR	National Institute for Health Research
CRN	Clinical Research Network	PACE	Primary care use of A C-reactive protein point of care test to help target antibiotic prescribing to patients with acute Exacerbations of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease who are most likely to benefit
CRP	C-reactive protein	POCT	point-of-care test
CRQ-SAS	Chronic Respiratory Disease Questionnaire Self-Administered Standardized	PPI	patient and public involvement
CSRI	Client Service Receipt Inventory	PSSRU	Personal Social Services Research Unit
CUA	cost–utility analysis	QALY	quality-adjusted life-year
EQ-5D	EuroQol 5-Dimensions	RCT	randomised controlled trial
EQ-5D-3L	EuroQol 5-Dimensions, three-level version	REC	Research Ethics Committee
EQ-5D-5L	EuroQol 5-Dimensions, five-level version	SAE	serious adverse event
EUCAST	European Committee on Antimicrobial Susceptibility Testing	SD	standard deviation
FEV ₁	forced expiratory volume in 1 second	SE	standard error
FVC	forced vital capacity		

Plain English summary

People with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) often experience flare-ups known as acute exacerbations of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Antibiotics are prescribed for most flare-ups, but they do not always benefit patients and may cause harm, such as side effects or subsequent infections that are resistant.

Rapid point-of-care tests (POCTs) can be used to help determine when antibiotics are more likely to be needed. C-reactive protein (CRP) is a marker of inflammation that can be measured with a POCT. Patients with flare-ups and a low CRP value are less likely to benefit from antibiotics. The PACE trial asked whether or not measuring CRP with a POCT could lead to fewer antibiotics being consumed for flare-ups, without having negative effects for patients.

We aimed to recruit 650 patients with a COPD flare-up from primary care. Patients were randomly assigned to either (1) usual care with the addition of a CRP POCT, or (2) usual care without the addition of the test. Antibiotic use over the first 4 weeks and patients' self-assessment of their health 2 weeks after enrolment were measured in both groups.

Patients in the CRP test group used fewer antibiotics than those managed as usual, and had improved patient-reported outcomes. Costs were a little higher in the CRP POCT group. Interviews with patients and clinicians found that they appreciated the CRP test being included in the decision-making process.

Scientific summary

Background

Unnecessary antibiotic use drives antimicrobial resistance, wastes resources, may cause adverse effects and may distract from potentially more effective interventions for individuals. Point-of-care tests (POCTs) for acute infections are being promoted by government, by industry and in clinical guidelines to reduce inappropriate antibiotic prescribing, help contain antimicrobial resistance and improve patient outcomes. However, most evaluations of POCTs have examined analytic performance only, and there have been few trials evaluating clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness in the context in which POCTs are intended to be used. About 4.5% of the population over the age of 45 years live with diagnosed chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and about half of these people experience one or more acute exacerbations of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (AECOPD) that require medical treatment each year. Over 2 million antibiotic courses are prescribed for AECOPD each year in the UK, and most of these are issued in primary care. Although some patients with AECOPD are helped by these prescriptions, many are not, and so some antibiotics may simply damage the microbiome. Among patients admitted to hospital, a bacterial aetiology was identified in 30%, a viral agent was identified in 23%, both bacterial and viral agents were identified in a further 25%, and 20% of the AECOPDs were caused by other factors. The antibiotic prescribing recommendations for primary care management of AECOPD are generally based on clinical features alone (Anthonisen criteria, namely increased breathlessness, increased sputum volume and increased sputum purulence) (Anthonisen NR, Manfreda J, Warren CP, Hershfield ES, Harding GK, Nelson NA. Antibiotic therapy in exacerbations of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. *Ann Intern Med* 1987;**106**:196–204). These features are subjective and have insufficient diagnostic accuracy to predict which patients can safely be managed without antibiotics.

C-reactive protein (CRP) is an acute phase protein that rises rapidly in infections and can be measured easily at the point of care, and it is considered the most selective biomarker to confirm AECOPD. A randomised controlled trial in primary care found no difference in clinical cure between patients with AECOPD treated with antibiotics and those treated with placebo who had a CRP level of < 40 mg/l. The availability of CRP POCT results may, therefore, help guide prescribing decisions for AECOPD to reduce antibiotic consumption, reduce antimicrobial resistance and improve patient outcomes. However, the clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of CRP POCT have not yet been evaluated in a pragmatic controlled trial in primary care.

Objective

We aimed to establish whether or not the addition of a CRP POCT to usual care for AECOPD in primary care safely and cost-effectively reduces antibiotic consumption for AECOPD.

Methods

Trial design

The PACE (Primary care use of A C-reactive protein point-of-care test to help target antibiotic prescribing to patients with acute Exacerbations of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease who are most likely to benefit) trial was a multicentre, parallel-arm, individually randomised controlled open trial with embedded health economics and qualitative process evaluations, conducted between September 2015 and February 2017 in UK general medical practices.

Intervention guidance

All participating sites were provided with information on the current best practice for managing AECOPD, which included a brief summary of National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and the Global Initiative for Chronic Obstructive Lung Disease (GOLD) guidance, and were provided with a desktop CRP POCT Afinion device [Alere Afinion™ AS100 Analyzer, Alere Inc. (now Abbott Diagnostics), IL, USA]. Clinicians were given training in the use of the POCT and guidance on interpreting the test results, which emphasised that the decision about antibiotic prescribing should be based on a comprehensive assessment of the likely risks and benefits, given the patient's underlying health status and clinical features. In addition, the guidance indicated that for patients with a CRP level of < 20 mg/l, antibiotics are unlikely to be beneficial and usually should not be prescribed; for patients with a CRP level of 20–40 mg/l, antibiotics may be beneficial, mainly if purulent sputum is present; and for patients with a CRP level of > 40 mg/l, antibiotics are likely to be beneficial.

Eligibility, recruitment and randomisation

Men or women were eligible if they were aged ≥ 40 years, had a primary care diagnosis of COPD, presented with an AECOPD (with at least one of increased dyspnoea, increased sputum volume and increased sputum purulence) of between 24 hours' and 21 days' duration, and provided informed, written consent.

Participants were allocated to the trial arms using remote online computerised randomisation.

Data collection

Baseline data collected included the number of days the patient had AECOPD symptoms, the patient's medical history and clinicians' examination findings.

A sputum sample, when obtainable, and throat swab samples were taken, and participants self-completed the Clinical COPD Questionnaire (CCQ) and the EuroQol 5-Dimensions (EQ-5D) questionnaire prior to randomisation. Clinicians recorded their antibiotic prescribing and other management decisions for all participants after randomisation and assessment.

Participants were followed up with telephone calls at week 1 and week 2, and a face-to-face consultation at 4 weeks post randomisation, during which a further throat swab and sputum sample (when available) were taken. At 6 months, the Chronic Respiratory Disease Questionnaire Self-Administered Standardized (CRQ-SAS) and EQ-5D questionnaires were posted to participants, who completed these and returned them using provided stamped addressed envelopes, and we collected relevant data from electronic medical records.

Clinicians were asked to carry out a CRP POCT as part of their assessment of participants allocated to the intervention (CRP POCT arm). For patients allocated to usual care (control arm), clinicians were asked not to use CRP POCT in their management of those patients' AECOPD at any time during participation.

Outcome measures

We used two co-primary outcomes because any reduction in antibiotic consumption would have to be considered alongside any negative impact on patient recovery. The first co-primary outcome was patient-reported antibiotic consumption for AECOPD within 4 weeks post randomisation. The second co-primary outcome was COPD health status (total score) measured with the CCQ at 2 weeks post randomisation.

Sample size

The study aimed to have sufficient power to detect a 15% reduction from an estimated 70% of patients consuming antibiotics for AECOPD during the 4 weeks following randomisation, and sufficient power to demonstrate that participants managed with the CRP POCT do no worse (non-inferior) than those managed without the CRP POCT, in terms of their COPD health status measured with the CCQ 2 weeks post randomisation. Assuming an expected difference between the arms of zero, a non-inferiority margin of 0.3 [smaller than the lowest minimal clinically important difference and a common standard deviation (SD) of 1.1], based on a one-sided significance level of 0.05 and 90% power, the study needed 462 participants, inflated to 580 to account for the loss to follow-up of approximately 20% of participants. It was also anticipated that the outcomes would not be entirely independent. Therefore, we aimed to recruit at least 650 participants to maintain an overall power between 81% and 90%.

Clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness analyses

The main clinical effectiveness analysis was based on a modified intention-to-treat population, which included all randomised participants who provided outcome data, regardless of protocol deviations or intervention received. All planned analyses were described in detail in a statistical analysis plan.

A within-trial health economic analysis was undertaken from a UK NHS perspective that assessed CRP POCT implementation costs in primary care and subsequent health-care costs within the trial follow-up period of 6 months. A cost-effectiveness analysis based on the co-primary outcome of antibiotic consumption at 4 weeks and a cost-utility analysis at 6 months were performed. Furthermore, a cost-consequences analysis and a budget impact analysis were conducted and the robustness of the results was tested in sensitivity analyses.

Process evaluation

A qualitative process evaluation was undertaken to facilitate the interpretation of results and assist with implementation planning. Semistructured telephone interviews were carried out with 20 purposively sampled patients and 20 primary care staff. A topic guide focused on experiences of the management of AECOPD, the acceptability, implementation and potential mechanisms of the CRP POCT intervention and contextual factors that could influence future implementation. Audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed using framework analysis.

Results

Baseline characteristics

In total, 653 participants were randomised from 86 general practices between January 2015 and February 2017. Three withdrew consent and one was randomised in error (the patient had been randomised, but the clinician then noted that this patient was ineligible and so their baseline data were destroyed), leaving 324 usual-care and 325 CRP POCT participants. The mean age was 68.1 (SD 9.42) years; 51.6% of participants were men; 10.8% of participants had mild COPD (GOLD I), 54.8% of participants had moderate COPD (GOLD II), 28.1% of participants had severe COPD (GOLD III) and 6.3% of participants had very severe COPD (GOLD IV); the mean ratio of forced expiratory volume in 1 second (FEV₁) to forced vital capacity (FVC) was 0.6 (SD 0.13); the mean percentage predicted FEV₁ was 59.8% (SD 20.04%); the mean number of days with symptoms prior to consultation was 6.9 (SD 5.13) days; the mean baseline CCQ total score was 3.3 (SD 1.14) points; and the baseline health utility (EQ-5D) was 0.7 (SD 0.25). Overall, no pathogens were detected in 95 out of 386 baseline sputum samples (24.6%), bacterial pathogens were only detected in 79 out of 386 (20.5%), viral/atypical pathogens were only detected in 123 out of 386 cases (31.9%) and both bacterial and viral/atypical pathogens were detected in 89 out of 386 cases (23.1%). Participants in both trial arms were well matched for these and other characteristics at baseline.

Primary outcome

In total, 537 out of the 649 randomised participants contributed to the primary analysis of self-reported antibiotic consumption at 4 weeks post randomisation (82.7%), and 563 contributed to the primary analysis of CCQ total score at 2 weeks post randomisation (86.7%). Antibiotics were *consumed* for AECOPD by 212 (77.4%) usual-care participants and 150 (57.0%) CRP POCT participants [adjusted odds ratio (AOR) 0.31, 95% confidence interval (CI) 0.20 to 0.47]. The adjusted mean CCQ score difference at 2 weeks was -0.19 (two-sided 90% CI -0.33 to -0.05) points. The upper limit of the CI did not contain the prespecified non-inferiority margin of 0.3.

Antibiotic prescribing at index consultation and 4-week follow-up

Antibiotic prescribing at the index consultation was ascertained for all but one participant, and 22% fewer participants in the CRP POCT arm were *prescribed* antibiotics (47.7% in the usual-care arm vs. 69.7% in the CRP POCT arm, AOR 0.31, 95% CI 0.21 to 0.45), and 21% fewer participants were prescribed antibiotics over the 4-week follow-up (59.1% vs. 79.7%, AOR 0.30, 95% CI 0.20 to 0.46).

Antibiotic prescribing and C-reactive protein values at index consultation

A total of 97.5% (317/325) of participants allocated to the CRP POCT arm reported receiving a CRP POCT during the recruitment consultation, and the median CRP value was 6 mg/l (interquartile range 5–18.5 mg/l); 76.0% of participants (241/317) had CRP levels of < 20 mg/l. Antibiotics were prescribed for 33% of those patients with a CRP level of < 20 mg/l in the CRP POCT arm at the index consultation.

Secondary outcomes

There was no evidence of a difference between the arms regarding symptoms sometimes attributed as adverse effects from antibiotics and other COPD treatments (AOR 0.79, 95% CI 0.44 to 1.39; $p = 0.410$), primary or secondary care consultations during the 6 months following randomisation (AOR 1.39, 95% CI 0.46 to 4.15; $p = 0.559$), or pneumonia diagnoses at 4 weeks (AOR 1.57, 95% CI 0.28 to 8.84; $p = 0.608$) and 6 months (AOR 0.73, 95% CI 0.29 to 1.82; $p = 0.495$). There was no evidence to conclude that there were any differences between the arms for CRQ-SAS outcomes at 6 months.

No meaningful or statistically significant differences were found between the arms at 1 month in the potential pathogens and antibiotic resistant isolates from sputum, or in resistance in commensal and potentially pathogenic organisms isolated from throat swabs.

Adverse events

Two participants, both in the usual-care arm, died during the first 4 weeks following randomisation: these serious adverse events were not related to the intervention or to trial participation.

Economic evaluation

Reduced antibiotic costs at the initial consultation were offset by higher total medication costs over the following 6 months, mainly caused by a 5.4% increase in prescribing of inhaled medication in the CRP POCT arm. COPD-related primary care contacts were lower in the intervention arm, with 2.7% fewer general practitioner visits. Although outpatient attendances were reduced in the CRP POCT arm (4.1% fewer appointments at 4 weeks and 6.7% fewer at 6 months), the secondary care cost for any condition was higher for all follow-up periods as a result of increased inpatient length of stay for a small number of intervention patients. The total incremental cost was £17.59 at 4 weeks and £126.26 at 6 months, driven mainly by the higher inpatient cost and the cost of CRP testing. If only COPD-related health-care costs are considered, the cost in both arms was similar, with the CRP test cost of £11.31 per test slightly offset by savings in health-care resource use. The mean incremental cost-effectiveness ratios were £222 (95% CI $-\text{£}42.00$ to $\text{£}518.14$) per 1% reduction in antibiotic consumption compared with usual care at 4 weeks and £15,251 (95% CI $\text{£}2959$ to $\text{£}22,813$) per quality-adjusted life-year gained at 6 months. Patients in the CRP POCT arm had fewer days off work, with reduced costs of productivity loss of £510.42 (95% CI $-\text{£}989.56$ to $-\text{£}31.28$; $p = 0.022$) per patient reporting periods of worktime missed.

Process evaluation

Patients participating in the qualitative evaluation felt that the CRP POCT was useful in detecting infection and targeting treatment more appropriately, and that it seemed quick and easy to use. Clinicians reported enhanced confidence in making management decisions and reduced decisional ambiguity when withholding antibiotics, and felt that the CRP POCT was a useful tool for communicating with and reassuring patients. They were keen to emphasise that the test should be used alongside, and not as a replacement for, clinical assessment. Cartridge preparation time and the cost of the equipment presented a significant barrier when implementing the test.

Conclusions

A CRP POCT diagnostic strategy resulted in a 20% absolute reduction in patient-reported antibiotic consumption over 4 weeks and in clinician antibiotic prescribing at the index consultation, and no clinically important change in patient-reported condition-specific quality of life, without evidence of an increase in total COPD-related costs. The use of the CRP POCT strategy was broadly acceptable to patients and clinicians. There were no associated harms identified in the trial, although clinicians indicated that the time and costs associated with the CRP POCT needed careful consideration.

Awareness of receiving the POCT may have contributed to enhanced COPD health status; however, this real-world effect needed to be captured. As awareness of intervention allocation may have an impact on participant help-seeking, and, as capturing this is critical to assessments of cost-effectiveness, this was an open trial.

C-reactive protein POCT strategies in primary care have been shown to safely and cost-effectively reduce antibiotic prescribing for acute cough; however, only a small minority of participants in those studies had AECOPD, and none reported effects on antibiotic consumption rather than antibiotic prescribing.

We confirmed that bacterial infection is a likely trigger for AECOPD in a minority of patients, and that there may be potential for further safe reductions in antibiotic use for AECOPD, given that one-third of participants with a CRP level of < 20 mg/l were nevertheless prescribed antibiotics.

This trial provides good evidence that CRP POCT testing (with the associated guidance for clinicians that was used in this trial) to guide antibiotic prescribing decisions for AECOPD in primary care is safe and effective. Further research, building on our qualitative findings, could help guide effective implementation.

Trial registration

This trial is registered as ISRCTN24346473.

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