International Journal of Orthopaedics Sciences

E-ISSN: 2395-1958
P-ISSN: 2706-6630
IJOS 2024; 10(2): 32-39

https://www.orthopaper.com
Received: 08-02-2024
Accepted: 12-03-2024

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The aggregated data from normal saline placebo arms of hyaluronic acid and other knee injection studies for OA can be used as a control group for single-armed knee injection studies

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.22271/ortho.2024.v10.i2a.3529

Abstract
Purposes: Platelet-rich plasma (PRP) and stem cell treatments are commonly used for the treatment of osteoarthritis (OA). Studies of these treatments are often criticized due to lack of a control group. However, controlled studies are both prohibitively expensive and resisted by patients. There are numerous controlled studies of hyaluronic acid and other injectates that report detailed characteristics of their placebo arms in which saline was injected. The accumulated data from these placebo arms can serve as a historical control. Our objective was to characterize the magnitude and duration of this placebo/saline effect for the purpose of providing a control group against which the effects of knee injection can be measured in single armed OA knee injection studies without control groups.
Methods: We performed a comprehensive search of the MEDLINE database for randomized clinical trials in adult humans of an injective therapy for osteoarthritis of the knee which included injection of 'normal' or physiological saline (0.9% NaCl) as a placebo cohort. Included studies reported results to at least 3 months post-injection using either a visual analog scale for pain (VAS) and/or a WOMAC total score (the Western Ontario and McMaster Universities Osteoarthritis Index). Studies were excluded if the injective therapy was paired with additional intervention including physical therapy and surgical procedures. Mean scores were calculated for pre-treatment and at 3 months and 6 months post treatment. Reported scores at other intervals were noted for secondary review.
Results: 33 study arms met the criteria of which 24 reported WOMAC total scores and 19 reported VAS scores. The mean change in WOMAC scores peaked at 1-3 weeks, then declined below or near the minimal clinically important difference (MCID) by 12 weeks. The mean VAS scores similarly peaked at 1-3 weeks but never exceeded MCID at any time point.
Conclusions: The normal saline therapeutic effect for knee injection for OA is small, peaks early, is short-lived and relatively consistent among studies. It can provide a useful valid control group against which to measure the therapeutic effects of single armed knee injection studies of PRP, stem cell or other injection treatments for osteoarthritis.

Keywords: Normal saline placebo arms, hyaluronic acid, knee injection studies, OA

Introduction
The treatment of arthritis by injection decreases suffering and avoids surgery when successful. Platelet-rich plasma and stem cell treatments are commonly performed for this purpose with good results [26]. Studies of these treatments are often criticized due to lack of a control group. However controlled studies are both prohibitively expensive and resisted by patients because of the placebo arm. However, there are a number of previously performed studies of hyaluronic acid (HA) and other injectates that report detailed characteristics of the results of saline injections used as placebo arms in these studies. Any benefits seen in these results either represents a placebo effect or a saline treatment effect. In either case, the accumulated data can serve as a historical control group, against which the effects of platelet-rich plasma, stem cell injection, or other biologic treatment can be measured regarding both magnitude of response and duration of response, thus obviating the need for a contemporaneous control group. We hypothesized that the saline placebo effects of injection into the knee for knee osteoarthritis would be small in magnitude and would generally peak by three months and significantly

attenuate by six months.

Materials and Methods

We performed a comprehensive search of the MEDLINE database for randomized clinical trials in adult humans of an injective therapy for osteoarthritis of the knee which included saline injection as a placebo cohort. The search was performed in April 2020 in PubMed using the terms: (knee AND (saline OR placebo OR controlled OR randomized) AND (arthritis OR osteoarthritis OR OA)) AND (adant OR arthrease OR arthrum OR artz OR artzal OR biohy OR clodronate OR cortisone OR durolane OR euflexxa OR fermathron OR gel-200 OR gel-one OR gelsyn-3 OR genvisc OR go-on OR hya-ject OR hya-joint OR hyalgan OR hyaluronate OR hyaluronic acid OR hylan g-f 20 OR hymovis OR interleukin-1 receptor antagonist OR lmwf-5a OR monovisc OR msc OR nasha OR nrd-101 OR nuflexxa OR orthovisc OR ostenil OR platelet-rich plasma OR replasyn OR slm-10 OR sodium hyaluronate OR steroid OR steroidal OR structovial OR sunevyl OR supartz OR suplasyn OR svf OR synject OR synovial OR synvisc OR synvisc-one OR tgf-ß1-expressing chondrocytes OR triamcinolone acetonide OR variofill OR zeel compositum). Studies were excluded if they used more than four injections of placebo, if the placebo contained anything other than 'normal' or physiological saline (0.9% NaCl), if the follow up interval was less than 3 months, if the injective therapy was paired with any other intervention including physical therapy programs and surgical procedures, or if they were not written in English. Outcomes scores had to include either a visual analog scale for pain (VAS) and/or a total Western Ontario and McMaster Universities Osteoarthritis Index (WOMAC) score. Outcome scores had to include either pre and post treatment scores or a change from pre to post treatment scores and had to report a score at either 3 months or at 6 months. VAS scores were included if they were global, at rest, or spontaneous. VAS scores after walking or other activity were not included. WOMAC scores were included if either a total WOMAC score was reported or if all three WOMAC subscores were reported and could be combined. WOMAC scores, which can be reported in a number of different scales, were all converted to a 0-96 point scale for analysis.

All selected papers were evaluated and WOMAC and VAS scores pre and post treatment were noted along with study duration. Mean scores and change in mean scores (Pre-score minus post score) were calculated for pre-treatment and at 3 months and 6 months post treatment. Reported scores at other intervals were noted for secondary review.

Results

The search produced 1580 articles. Initial review of the papers resulted in 110 potential papers for more in depth review. In depth reading of these papers eliminated an additional 78 papers resulting in 32 studies that met the inclusion criteria and were reviewed for this paper. (Fig 1) One of the studies had two placebo arms resulting in 33 groups whose results were included.

All included studies are shown in Table 1 along with their WOMAC and VAS scores, if reported, for both 3 months and 6 months. Only one study had follow up of the placebo arm beyond 6 months [38]. The change in score was calculated for both 3 months and 6 months. For all studies that reported at least two post treatment scores, the peak change in score and week post-treatment that the peak score occurred were calculated.

There were 24 study arms that reported WOMAC scores. Twenty-two reported 3 months scores and 16 reported 6 month scores. Mean WOMAC declined from 50.2 pre-treatment, 39.6 at three months post-treatment and 38.1 at 6 months (Scale 0-96 with 0 best). The mean change in scores was 10.2 at 3 months and 11.2 at 6 months. An AOSSM Outcome Task Force lead by Irrgang [14] reported that the minimal clinically important difference (MCID) for the WOMAC total score for knee osteoarthritis was 11.5 on a 100 point scale, which is the equivalent of 11.0 on a 96 point scale. The mean change in WOMAC scores were just above this number at the peak time, below it at 3 months and equal to the MCID at 6 months. Of the 24 study arms that included WOMAC scores, 18 of the studies reported a peak change or single score above the MCID. Six of the studies never had a score that exceeded the MCID.

Follow up scores at all additional points of time were extracted and the change in WOMAC scores calculated. Scores were aggregated in four groups; follow up at 1-3 weeks, 4-8 weeks, 12-16 weeks, and 24 to 26 weeks. If more than one score was reported in a time range, the highest reported scores were used. There were only 3 scores reported between 16 and 24 weeks, so this interval was not included. The mean outcomes are shown in Figure 2 along with the MCID. Improvement from treatment with placebo was strongest in the first couple weeks after treatment and rapidly fell so that by 3 months improvement levels were below MCID and remained below or near the MCID level after that point.

There were 19 study arms that included VAS scores. Seventeen reported 3 months scores and 13 reported 6 month scores. Mean VAS declined from 59.2 pre-treatment, 43.4 at three months post-treatment and 40.5 at 6 months (scale 0-100, 0 best). The mean change in scores was 16.0 at 3 months and 16.5 at 6 months. Tubach [40] reported the MCID for knee osteoarthritis for a VAS pain score was 19.9. The mean change in VAS scores was below this for all reported points. Ten of the studies reported a peak change above the MCID and 9 reported scores that were below the MCID at all times.

Follow up scores at all additional points of time were extracted and the change in VAS scores calculated. Scores were aggregated in four groups; follow up at 1-3 weeks, 4-8 weeks, 12-16 weeks, and 24 to 26 weeks. If more than one score was reported in a time range, the highest reported scores were used. There were only 3 scores reported between 16 and 24 weeks, so this interval was not included. The mean outcomes are shown in Figure 3 along with the MCID. Improvement from treatment with placebo, although always below the MCID, was strongest at 1 to 3 weeks after treatment and fell after that point.

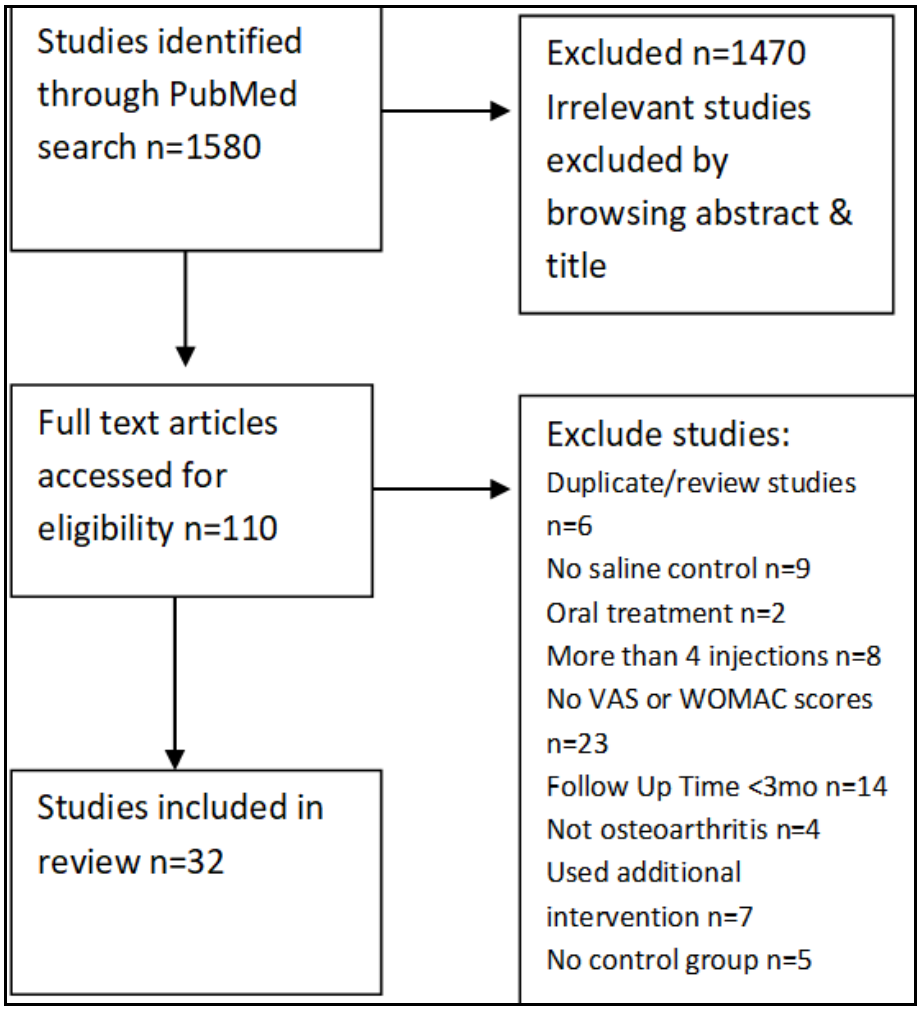

Fig 1: Study Selection Flow Chart

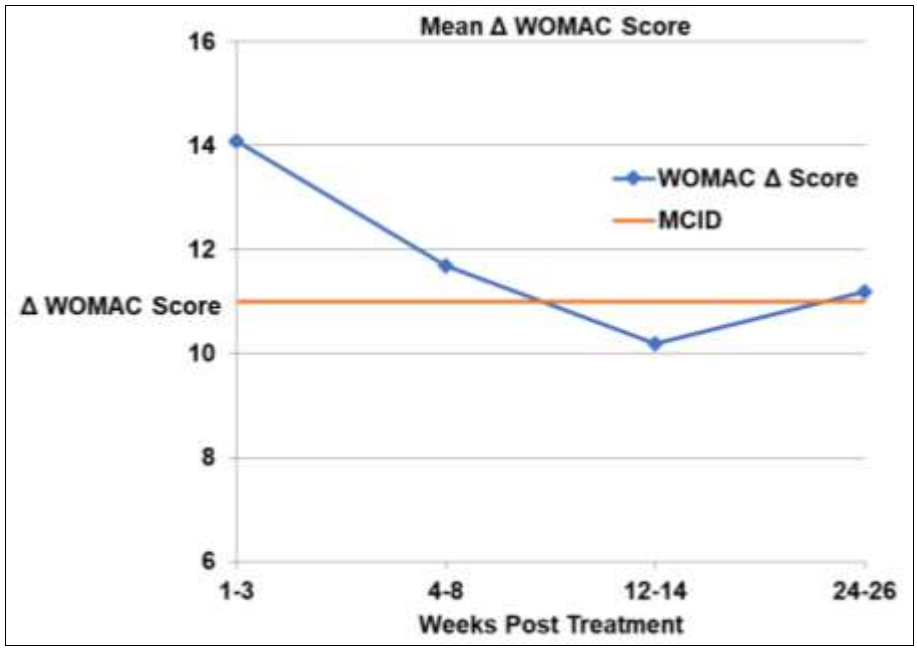

Fig 2: Mean Change in WOMAC Scores: Shows the mean change in WOMAC (Western Ontario and McMaster Universities Osteoarthritis Index) total score at four intervals post treatment. The line in red is the MCID - minimal clinically important difference, reported previously [14]

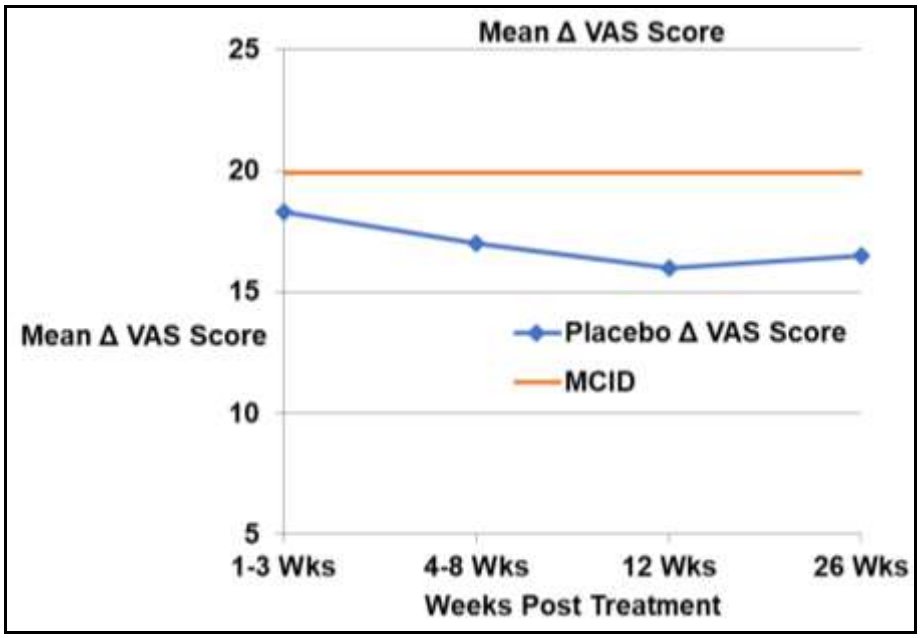

Fig 3: Mean Change in VAS Scores: Shows the mean change in VAS (Visual Analogue Score) for pain at four intervals post treatment. The line in red is the MCID - minimal clinically important difference, reported previously [40]

Table 1: Included studies with VAS & WOMAC scores at peak effect, 3 months and 6 months

	WOMAC Peak Effect			VAS Peak Effect				WOMAC Scores					VAS Scores				
Author/Year/ Cohort	**Time (Wks)**	**Δ Score**	**Exceeds MCID?**	**Time (Wks)**	**Δ Score**	**Exceeds MCID?**	**# of Joints**	**Pre Treat-ment**	**3 MO**	**Δ 3 MO**	**6 MO**	**Δ 6 Mo**	**Pre Treat-ment**	**3 Mo**	**Δ 3 MO**	**6 MO**	**Δ 6 Mo**
Altman 2004 [1]	12	13.2	Y	NA	NA	NA	174	46.9	33.7	13.2	35.8	11.1	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Altman 2009 [2]	*	*	NA	NA	NA	NA	259	NA	NA	NA	NA	14.4	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Baltzer 2009 [3]	7	13.0	Y	7	19.6	N	99	49.6	38.2	11.3	37.8	11.8	66.3	48.8	17.5	48.2	18.1
Bar-Or 2014 - 10ml [4]	*	*	Y	NA	NA	NA	81	42.6	29.0	13.6	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Bar-Or 2014 - 4ml [4]	*	*	Y	NA	NA	NA	83	44.3	30.4	13.9	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Brandt 2001 [6]	12	13.5	Y	NA	NA	NA	69	61.4	47.9	13.5	49.9	11.5	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Bunyaratavej 2001[7]	NA	NA	NA	16	28.0	Y	25	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	45.0	18.0	27.0	20.0	25.0
Chao 2010 [8]	4	1.0	N	NA	NA	NA	29	45.3	45.9	-0.6	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Chevalier 2010 [9]	*	*	Y	NA	NA	NA	129	54.6	NA	NA	42.4	12.2	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Cole 2018 [10]	*	*	Y	NA	NA	NA	223	45.8	33.2	12.6	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Farr 2019 [12]	NA	NA	NA	12	19.9	Y	66	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	81.0	61.1	19.9	62.5	18.5
Henrotin 2017 [13]	NA	NA	NA	26	35.6	Y	41	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	66.4	36.2	30.2	30.8	35.6
Karlsson 2002 [16]	12	18.2	Y	3	21.0	Y	57	48.9	30.7	18.2	32.1	16.8	65.0	46.0	19.0	44.0	21.0
Khalifeh 2019 [17]	NA	NA	NA	24	36.0	Y	10	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	69.0	NA	NA	33.0‡	36.0‡
Kotevoglu 2006 [18]	3	25.3	Y	NA	NA	NA	18	68.8	53.6	15.2	53.6	15.2	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Kul-Panza 2010 [20]	5	7.9	N	14	23.0	Y	22	70.6	63.6	7.0	NA	NA	65.0	42.0	23.0	NA	NA
Langworthy 2019 [21]	16	14.1	Y	8	17.0	N	60	51.2	38.9	12.3	38.5‡	12.7‡	63.0	46.0	17.0	47.0	16.0
Lee 2015 [22]	12	7.0	N	12	14.0	N	27	37.0	30.0	7.0	30.0	7.0	64.0	50.0	14.0	52.0	12.0
Lee 2019 [23]	26	11.4	Y	12	3.0	N	12	56.4	52.0	4.4	45.0	11.4	58.0	55.0	3.0	55.0	3.0
Lin 2019 [24]	26	1.5	N	NA	NA	NA	27	46.6	47.1	-1.1	45.1	1.5	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
McCormack 2017 [25]	6	31.4	Y	NA	NA	NA	69	54.0	25.4	28.7	23.8	30.2	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Mendes 2019 [27]	12	13.8	Y	12	23.0	Y	35	47.1	33.3	13.8	NA	NA	45.0	22.0	23.0	NA	NA
Patel 2013 [28]	6	-1.2	N	*	*	N	46	45.5	50.7	-5.2	53.1	-7.6	45.7	NA	NA	46.1	-0.4
Ravaud 1999 [32]	NA	NA	NA	1	10.7	N	28	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	63.7	61.2	2.5	58.2	5.5
Rossini 2015 [34]	NA	NA	NA	16	38.2	Y	35	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	55.4	21.1	34.3	NA	NA
Shapiro 2016 [36]	NA	NA	NA	26	21.0	Y	25	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	29.0	10.0	19.0	8.0	21.0
Shrestha 2018 [37]	6	14.8	Y	2	10.3	N	58	56.5	56.1	0.4	NA	NA	67.3	69.0	-1.7	NA	NA
Smith 2016 [38]	8	15.0	Y	NA	NA	NA	15	46.0	37.0	9.0	44.0	2.0	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Strand 2012 [39]	*	*	N	NA	NA	NA	119	65.1	59.0	6.1	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
VanderWeegen 2015 [41]	12	16.5	Y	12	9.8	N	97	40.8	22.5	16.5	28.8	12.0	24.6	14.8	9.8	21.5	3.1
Wobig 1998 [42]	NA	NA	NA	3	22.0	Y	54	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	75.0	62.0	13.0	NA	NA
Wu 2018 [44]	26	16.6	Y	NA	NA	NA	20	28.8	13.4	15.4	12.2	16.6	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Yavuz 2012 [45]	NA	NA	NA	1	15.0	N	30	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	76.0	74.0	2.0	NA	NA
Mean Scores	12.6	12.4		13.0	21.1			50.2	39.6	10.2	38.1	11.2	59.2	43.4	16.0	40.5	16.5
Total # Studies 32/Arms 33					# of Patients		2142										

* Only one endpoint reported

‡ 24 weeks reported

VAS – pain visual analogue scale (0-100, 0 best), WOMAC - Western Ontario and McMaster Universities Osteoarthritis Index Total Score (0-96, 0 best), MCID - minimal clinically important difference**, Δ –** Pre to post treatment change, Y – Yes, N – No, NA – No available information

Discussion

The most important findings of the present study were although there was a definite placebo effect after injection of saline into the knee joint, the effect was neither strong nor of long duration. The majority of placebo arms of these studies showed improvement from baseline to 12 weeks and 26 weeks. However, these improvement levels were small and peaked fairly quickly after treatment. The mean change in both WOMAC and VAS peaked in the 1 to three week period after treatment and dropped off after that. While the initial improvement in WOMAC scores was above the MCID, they quickly fell below that level at 12 weeks and just at the MCID at 26 weeks. VAS scores never reached the level of MCID. If the placebo is being used to compare to a short term treatment such as cortisone, then the placebo effect may make efficacy harder to determine. However, for treatment of injections of longer expected effectiveness, the placebo effect becomes less relevant. For HA injections, whose effect can be expected to last 26 weeks, the placebo effect is significantly reduced, and for PRP and stem cell treatments whose effects may last a year or more, the placebo effects can be expected to be minimal. For these longer term studies, placebo control should be unnecessary because the placebo effects do not last long enough to have significant effects on outcomes past six months.

While placebo controlled studies remain the gold standard, such studies are extremely expensive and complicated to carry out and poorly received by patients who want clinical improvement, not the chance of extending their pain by receiving a placebo. They recognize that biologic treatments have shown efficacy and do not want to suffer by getting placebo treatment. Indeed, it is ethically wrong to provide a placebo as an alternative when it is clear that the treatment arm is efficacious. The only justification for doing so is that insurance and other payers insist on these studies to authorize treatment. However treatment should be indicated based on medical data, not because of the habits and biases of insurance companies who are much more comfortable with pharmaceutical drugs and their evidence standards and so far have lacked the flexibility to evaluate biologic, non-pharmaceutical treatments appropriately.

This is especially true for treatment modalities such as PRP (Platelet-rich plasma) and autologous mesenchymal stem cells, where clinical efficacy has already been shown in dozens of studies [5, 11, 15, 30, 46]. For treatments such as these, which have unquestionably proven to be safe [31] and also have definite evidence of efficacy, the requirement that only placebo-controlled studies be considered as legitimate has a chilling effect on beneficial research. This requirement also introduces bias against autologous treatment and in favor of either pharmaceutical treatments or allogeneic biologic treatments. Because randomized placebo-controlled studies engender massive costs, the costs will only be incurred if a sufficient payoff exists later to warrant them. Realistically, only pharmaceutical companies have the funds to carry out these types of clinical trials. Since autologous tissue treatments cannot be patented and will not create large returns like a patented drug or allogeneic cell line, they are understandably not funded by pharmaceutical companies. This is unfortunate, because in all areas of medicine, autologous tissues have been shown to be safe, as or more effective than allogeneic tissues and significantly less expensive. Thus a requirement that studies be placebo-controlled to be believed exerts a chilling effect on the most effective regenerative medicine treatments – autologous tissue.

Fortunately however, the numerous billion dollar studies paid for by pharmaceutical companies have produced a large literature of placebo treated patients which are perfectly suited to serve as historical controls for single arm treatment studies of PRP, stem cell and other biologic treatments. The "placebo" in all of the studies is saline. It has been argued that saline is not actually a placebo but rather has a therapeutic effect. Even if this is true it is a suitable historical control group against which to compare other injection treatments. Furthermore it allows comparison both by magnitude of effect and duration of effect to other proposed treatments.

A review of the literature found two other studies that looked at the results of saline injections into the knee [29, 35]. Both of these studies concluded that saline injections provided substantial relief of symptoms above the MCID and out to at least six months. The mean VAS scores reported in these papers are very similar to the numbers we found, however the MCID used was 13.7 instead of 19.9 so all the scores were above the MCID. The MCID of 13.7 used was initially calculated based on rotator cuff pain, not knee pain. The 19.9 value we used was based on knee pain and therefore we believe is more accurate for this situation. If this value is used, all of the VAS scores fall below the MCID at all points in time. The WOMAC score MCIDs for both papers are substantially lower than the one used in our paper. Saltzman [35] reported a 6 month WOMAC score (the only time point reported) was 11.34, which is almost identical to the 11.2 we reported. However, this paper used 8.6 for the MCID instead of 11 as we used. Previtali [29] reported both higher scores at all time points and a lower MCID (6.4) than in this paper. Even applying the MCID of 11 used here, all WOMAC scores would be substantially about the MCID. We support the use of the higher MCID of 11.0 for the WOMAC scores, which is based on the AOSSM Outcomes Task Force report [14]. Overall, these papers support our results, although their conclusions differed, mainly because of different MCID standards applied to the results.

In our study we found that, despite a few outliers, the study results were generally remarkably consistent. The magnitude of effect was generally small, hovering around or below the MCID. The VAS scores were consistently below the MCID, while the WOMAC scores peaked early then dropped quickly and were attenuated substantially by six months. Thus any injection treatment which shows a substantially larger magnitude of effect or significant efficacy beyond six months can reasonably claim to show significant efficacy over placebo without having to overcome the ethical and financial challenges of creating a placebo arm. Further, the counter arguments against historical control groups generally do not apply to an aggregated control group such as this one.

A weakness of this study is a lack of data past the 6 month mark. None of the studies collected data past this point. However, since all of the scores peaked well before this point, there is no reason to believe that the scores would improve dramatically after this point.

Current dogma is heavily biased against biologic treatment and in favor of pharmacologic treatment. Biologics are not drugs and attempts to force them into drug paradigms greatly retard the introduction of beneficial treatments. The ability to utilize this study to validate such beneficial treatment is of more than theoretical benefit. Surgical treatment of arthritis results in roughly 15,000 deaths annually in the United States [19, 33]. Pharmacologic treatment with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medication has been estimated to result in

16,000 deaths annually in the USA [43]. Autologous biologic injection treatment, however, is completely safe, associated with zero mortality and morbidity, and is obviously much less expensive than surgery. Validation and adoption of these treatments would save lives, reduce suffering and drastically reduce costs. We have used the above results to study the efficacy of our own treatments and report for publication. It is hoped that the medical community will recognize the utility and validity of this approach for the benefit of our patients.

Conclusion
The accumulated body of placebo arms of pharmaceutical studies of hyaluronic acid treatments and other injectates can be usefully aggregated to provide a valid historical control treatment arm against which to compare and validate other injection treatments for arthritis – especially autologous PRP and stem cell treatments.

List of Abbreviations
VAS – Visual analogue scale
WOMAC - Western Ontario and McMaster Universities Osteoarthritis Index
MCID - minimal clinically important difference
Δ – Pre to post treatment change in
OA – Osteoarthritis
PRP - Platelet-rich plasma
HA - hyaluronic acid

Conflict of interest
None of the authors have any conflicts of interest to report.

Funding
No outside funding was supplied for this study.

Ethical approval
No ethical approval was needed for this study.

Informed consent
No informed consent was needed for this study.

Acknowledgements
None

Authors' contribution
CP and JL developed the concept of the work. JL and Sf carried out data collection, analysis and interpretation, JL wrote the initial draft and SF wrote the second draft of the paper, SF and CP performed critical revision of the paper. All authors read and approved the final version of the paper

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How to Cite This Article
Prodromos CC, Finkle S, Lotus J. The aggregated data from normal saline placebo arms of hyaluronic acid and other knee injection studies for OA can be used as a control group for single-armed knee injection studies. International Journal of Orthopaedics Sciences. 2024;10(2):32-39.