Topical Proxymetacaine Eyedrops in Fluorescein Angiography:
A Randomized, Double-blind Placebo-Controlled Trial

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**KEY WORDS:** proxymetacaine, fluorescein angiography, topical anesthesia

**ABSTRACT**

**Background and Aims:** Proxymetacaine eye drops are known to reduce subjects’ blink rates and are well tolerated compared with other topical anesthetic eye drops. A randomized, controlled trial was performed to assess their routine use in fluorescein angiography, investigating their effect on patient comfort and image quality.

**Methods:** One hundred patients undergoing routine fluorescein angiography were randomized to receive either proxymetacaine (0.5%) or saline eye drops to both eyes. The degree of comfort of the patient and any stinging sensation induced by the eye drops were recorded, as were the photographer’s independent assessment of image quality and overall procedural ease (using standardized linear analog scales). Requests made to hold the patient’s eyelids open were also noted.

**Results:** The patients’ comfort score data were not normally distributed and were negatively skewed. The comfort scores of the proxymetacaine group were significantly higher than those of the control group (proxymetacaine group: n = 50, median score 9; control group: n = 48, median 8; Mann-Whitney U test = 925, P = .044). Proxymetacaine had no significant effect on the photographer’s scores for image quality and overall ease of procedure, or on the requests for eyelids to be held open.

**Conclusion:** Although proxymetacaine use was associated with a significantly higher comfort score than in the control group, it is difficult to recommend routine use of proxymetacaine in fluorescein angiography because most patients in both groups found the procedure very tolerable. Moreover, proxymetacaine use did not significantly improve the overall ease of the procedure or the image quality, as judged by the photographer.

**INTRODUCTION**
Fluorescein angiography is an investigation...
Table 1. Demographic Details of the Patients.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient characteristics</th>
<th>Proxymetacaine group</th>
<th>Saline control group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean age (standard deviation)</td>
<td>75 (9.2)</td>
<td>70 (13.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median age</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnoses:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exudative macular degeneration</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atrophic macular degeneration</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diabetic-related disease</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retinal vein occlusion</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cystoid macular edema</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

routinely performed in the diagnosis and management of retinal disease. A fluorescein angiogram can be quite an uncomfortable procedure for a patient to undergo—staring into the brightly illuminated lens of a camera for long periods of time can be difficult and may lead to loss of fixation, excessive blinking, poor image quality, and discomfort.

It was hypothesized that a proportion of the discomfort induced by trying not to blink for prolonged periods of time could be alleviated by the use of topical anesthetic eye drops. Subjects’ blink rates are significantly lower following the administration of proxymetacaine (a benzoyl ester) eyedrops.\(^1\) By improving patient comfort, increased cooperation might lead to better fixation, improved photographs, and less need for intervention from a third party to hold patients’ eyelids open during the procedure.

We conducted a prospective randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled trial of 100 patients undergoing digital fluorescein angiography in our department. Proxymetacaine was chosen as the topical anesthetic agent due to its propensity to cause less stinging and ocular irritation than other topical agents,\(^2\)\(^3\) and its documented lower blink rate in healthy volunteers.\(^1\)

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Patients attending the department for routine digital fluorescein angiography were issued an information sheet regarding the procedure and the proposed trial. When satisfied with the information and provided that they were competent to consent, 100 consecutive patients were recruited into the study. Demographic details including their age, sex, and final diagnosis (after angiography) were recorded. Exclusion criteria included: allergy to proxymetacaine or fluorescein, functionally monocular patients, corneal conditions leading to reduced ocular surface sensation, and prior inclusion in the study. If patients were unable to read (due to cycloplegia or coexistent eye disease), they were only included in the study if an accompanying friend or relative was able to read the information sheet and post-procedure questionnaire to the patient.

After their pupils had been dilated with tropicamide (1%) and phenylephrine (2.5%), patients were then randomized to receive either: (i) a drop (50 μL) of proxymetacaine (0.5%) MINIMS to both eyes; or (ii) a drop of normal saline MINIMS to both eyes; immediately preceding angiography. The type of drops administered was concealed by code from the investigators, photographer, and patients. Patients were
specifically instructed not to discuss with
the photographer any ocular sensation expe-
rienced.

Digital photography and angiography
then proceeded routinely. After the end of
each session, both the photographer and
patient were questioned separately, through
the use of written questionnaires. The
patients were asked to rate their overall
comfort during the procedure, using a stan-
dardized linear analogue scale from 0
(unbearable or intolerable) to 10 (no prob-
lems or very tolerable). They also recorded
whether they found that the eye drops: (i)
did not sting; (ii) stung a little; or (iii) stung
a lot; upon administration. The photog-

Figure 1. Distribution of patients’ comfort scores.

RESULTS
The study was completed over a period of 5
months. A total of 100 patients were
recruited into the study, with 50 patients in
both the study and control groups. Two
patients withdrew from the study, one dur-
ing the procedure and one after the proce-
dure was completed; both of these patients
had received saline eye drops rather than
proxymetacaine. The demographic details
of the 100 patients are summarized in Table
1.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the
patients’ comfort scores. The comfort
scores of the patients were not normally
distributed and had a negative skew, sug-

ted that more patients found the proce-
dure tolerable than not. As one might expect, patients who had their lids held open supplied a lower comfort score (median score 8) than those who did not have their lids held open (median 9). There was a statistical difference in patient comfort scores between the proxymetacaine group and the control group (proxymetacaine group: n = 50, median = 9, lower quartile = 8.00, upper quartile = 10.00; saline group: n = 48, median = 8, lower quartile = 7.25, upper quartile = 9.00; Mann-Whitney U test = 925, $P = .044$).

Table 2 shows the results of the patients’ questionnaire pertaining to the stinging sensation induced by the eye drops. For the purposes of statistical analysis, due to insufficient data in the third row (Table 2), it was necessary to regroup the data into “none” versus “a little” or “a lot”. There was evidence to suggest an association between proxymetacaine use and an increased level of stinging sensation ($\chi^2$ test with Yates correction = 0.4901, $P = .444$). Table 3 shows the effect of proxymetacaine eye drops on the number of requests made by the photographer to hold patients’ eyelids open during the procedure. There was no evidence of an association between requests for eyelids to be held open and proxymetacaine use ($\chi^2$ test with Yates correction = 0.114, $P = .735$). In patients whose eyelids were held open, there was no evidence that there was a significant difference in comfort according to the use of proxymetacaine or saline (Mann-Whitney $U$ test=145.5, $P = .325$).

The distribution of the photographer’s scores for: (i) his overall satisfaction with the photographic result; and (ii) the overall ease of the procedure and the patient’s compliance; are shown in Figure 2. The data were not normally distributed. There was no evidence to suggest a

**DISCUSSION**

Most patients who took part in the study found that fluorescein angiography was a tolerable procedure. However, proxymetacaine eye drops, the most tolerated widely available topical anesthetic, with a documented lower blink rate than saline eye-drops, were accorded a significantly higher comfort score than saline eye drops in this study. This is despite the finding that proxymetacaine was associated with significantly more stinging than saline, which might actually have led patients in this group to attribute a lower comfort score to the procedure as a whole, possibly introducing an element of negative bias.

Although there are numerous studies concerning the comparison of different topical anesthetics in terms of tolerability and efficacy, there is little literature concerning their use in practical, nonsurgical situations, for example, in fluorescein angiography. In a different ophthalmological setting, Saunders et al compared the use of proxymetacaine and saline eye drops on infant
stress during routine eye examinations for retinopathy of prematurity. In their study, however, it was found that proxymetacaine offered no advantage over normal saline eyedrops during such examinations.

Proxymetacaine eyedrops did not lead to improved photographic images, as judged by the photographer. Although patients’ blink rates might have been lower in the proxymetacaine group, it is certainly possible that increased breakup of the tear film induced by the topical anesthetic led to a reduction in image quality. Unfortunately, technical restraints meant that accurate measurements of both blink rate and tear film breakup time were not possible in this study.

CONCLUSION
Proxymetacaine use was associated with improved patient comfort during fluorescein angiography, although image quality and overall procedural ease were not significantly affected. Patients in both study and control groups found the procedure very tolerable on the whole. It is therefore difficult to justify recommending the routine use of proxymetacaine eyedrops in this procedure, however, they might have a useful role in individual patients who would otherwise struggle to participate.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
SNM and ML conceived of the idea for the project. SNM, ML and SW wrote the original protocol. VJ-PD, ML, ST and SNM conducted the research. SNM and ML analyzed the data. SNM wrote the original manuscript, but all authors contributed to revisions of the manuscript. SNM will act as guarantor for the paper. We are grateful to Charlotte Carmichael for her assistance in the statistical analysis and to Sisters Clark and Bishop for their assistance in collecting data.

REFERENCES