

Medications on the Horizon for the Treatment of Moderate to Severe Inflammatory Bowel Disease

Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) is a chronic disorder of the gastrointestinal tract for which there is no cure. IBD encompasses the main disease subtypes of Crohn's disease (CD) and ulcerative colitis (UC).¹ IBD follows a heterogeneous, relapsing and remitting course that is characterised by symptoms of diarrhoea, abdominal pain, rectal bleeding, faecal urgency and incontinence, and fatigue.^{2,3} Other manifestations of IBD include anaemia, perianal fistulae in CD, colorectal cancer, and intestinal failure.^{2,3} Thus, IBD is a progressive disease that can lead to bowel damage and disability and requires lifelong monitoring.

The epidemiology and burden of IBD

The prevalence of IBD has increased worldwide over the last 30 years.⁴ The incidence of IBD is highest in the western world and ranges between 10.6/100,000/year to 29.3/100,000/year for CD and 17.4/100,000/year to 24.3/100,000/year.^{2,3,5} Over 20,000 New Zealanders currently suffer from IBD and the burden is expected to double by 2030 due to a rising incidence and compounding prevalence.⁶⁻⁸ There are also increasing rates of IBD amongst Māori compared to those seen historically (3-7% vs. 1%).⁹⁻¹¹ The peak age of onset of CD is between 20-40 years, with a smaller peak between 50-60 years.³ For UC, the peak age of onset is between 30-40 years.² Thus, individuals with IBD live the majority of their lives with their disease.

IBD is a progressive disease associated with significant morbidity from cancer, infection, thrombosis and suicide.¹²⁻¹⁵ IBD can also result in increased rates of hospitalisation for the treatment of disease relapses, surgical interventions, and to manage disease related- and treatment related-complications.¹⁶ Annual IBD hospitalisation rates in New Zealand are between 20-28/100,000 persons.^{8,10,17} Recurrent flares of inflammation in IBD lead to intestinal fibrosis with stricture and fistula formation (in CD), increasing the risk of surgery and stoma formation in young patients.^{18,19} Chronic gastrointestinal inflammation also increases the risk of colorectal cancer with higher rates of this malignancy (1%, 3% and 7% at 10, 20 and 30 years, respectively) observed in individuals with colonic CD and UC compared to the general population (2-3 fold increase in risk).²⁰⁻²² Up to a third of individuals with IBD also have symptoms of significant anxiety and depression.²³ Patients with IBD are less able to undertake education²⁴ and have limitations in their ability to engage in employment.^{25,26} Workplaces are often not able to accommodate aspects of IBD disability.^{27,28} Thus, IBD can result in a significantly disabling disease course that has a major impact on the lives of patients, their whanau and society.

Principles of treating IBD

Treatments for IBD include diet and nutritional therapies, medications, and surgery.²⁹⁻³¹ Drugs to treat IBD include aminosalicylates (5-ASA; which result in anti-inflammatory actions by downregulating inflammatory cytokine production and cellular proliferation),³² glucocorticoids (that inhibit the transcription of DNA sequences coding for inflammatory proteins and reduce signalling of these proteins through their interaction with transcription factors such as nuclear factor- κ B),³³ immunomodulators such as methotrexate (inhibit nucleotide synthesis and cellular proliferation)³⁴ and thiopurines (suppress proinflammatory T lymphocyte responses),³⁵ and biological agents.²⁹

Biological therapies that are efficacious for the treatment of IBD include anti-tumour necrosis factor antibodies (anti-TNF α ; Infliximab and Adalimumab),³⁶⁻³⁹ gut selective monoclonal antibodies to $\alpha_4\beta_7$ integrin that reduce recruitment of T-cells and proinflammatory monocytes to the intestine (Vedolizumab),^{40,41} and antagonists of IL-12 and IL-23 (Ustekinumab).^{42,43} Newer biological agents for the treatment of moderate to severe IBD also include Risankizumab, Guselkumab and Mirikizumab, which are monoclonal antibodies that bind to the p19 subunit of IL-23 to antagonise the proinflammatory actions of this pathway.⁴⁴⁻⁴⁶ These form of medications require either intravenous or subcutaneous dosing. The availability of infusion centres for intravenous

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administration of IBD medications is highly variable throughout Aotearoa/New Zealand raising concerns surrounding regional inequities in access to these medications. Oral small molecule inhibitors have also been shown to be effective treatments for moderate to severe forms of IBD such as Ozanimod and Etrasimod (sphingosine 1-phosphate receptor modulators that limit tracking of lymphocytes to the intestinal epithelium),^{47,48} and Tofacitinib, Filgotinib and Upadacitinib (janus kinase inhibitors (JAKi) that inhibit transduction of proinflammatory cytokine signalling pathways).^{49–53} The goal of medical therapies for IBD is to target intestinal inflammation with the aim of achieving endoscopic and histological remission of disease.⁵⁴ Achieving gut mucosal healing has been associated with a reduced risk for future relapses, IBD-related surgeries and hospitalisations.^{54,55} Disease activity in IBD is best assessed objectively through the use of endoscopic and radiological (magnetic resonance enterography, intestinal ultrasound) examination and the use of biomarkers such as C-reactive protein and faecal calprotectin.⁵⁴

The standard therapeutic ladder for IBD medications usually commences with aminosalicylates (5-ASA agents) for mild mucosal inflammation and immunomodulators for moderate disease.⁵⁶ Biological therapies are usually reserved to treat moderate to severely active IBD but approximately 30% of patients (primary non-response) do not have an initial response to these treatments with up to 50% losing response over time (secondary non-response).^{57,58} In these patients, response to therapy is best re-captured by switching to another therapeutic class in the setting of adequate drug concentrations and in the absence anti-drug antibodies.^{57–59} As IBD is often diagnosed in adolescence and early adulthood, patients often require multiple lines of therapy over their lifetime.^{2,3} Additionally, the optimal order for the use of biological therapies (sequencing of biological agents) is a growing field of research as efficacy of the first biological agent appears to be significantly greater than subsequent lines of therapy.^{57–61} The major driver for the increasing direct health costs for caring for patients with IBD is the use of biological therapies.^{62,63} However, the cost of these agents should be weighed against their potential utility at reducing the indirect costs of IBD and rates of healthcare utilisation from future hospital admissions, surgeries and outpatient visits.⁶³ Effective management of IBD can lead to improved work-related productivity, quality of life and societal contributions.^{26,27,63,64} Additional cost savings can be gained by substituting expensive therapies which have minimal therapeutic response to those that are similarly priced but result in meaningful clinical improvement.

Medications on the horizon for patients with IBD in Aotearoa/New Zealand

Improved understanding of the pathogenesis of CD and UC will advance endeavours to break the therapeutic ceiling that exists with currently available classes of biological medications for the treatment of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD).⁶⁵ The following section will aim to highlight agents that have shown efficacy in the treatment of moderate-to-severe IBD that are not currently available in New Zealand but are in clinical use in other parts of the world or are in late-stage drug development. Pertinent results for these agents from Phase 3 randomized, controlled studies are summarised in Table 1. These data are from adult patients with IBD and efficacy and safety profiles of these newer biological medications on paediatric patients with IBD is still being investigated.

Janus kinase (JAK) inhibitors – Tofacitinib, Upadacitinib, Filgotinib

Janus kinase inhibitors (JAKi) are being increasingly used for the treatment of IBD and other immune-mediated disorders. These are oral, small molecule drugs that target the JAK-STAT pathway, have a rapid onset of action, short half-life and lack features of immunogenicity.^{66,67} Tofacitinib, a pan-JAK inhibitor with higher inhibitory activity for JAK1 and JAK3 is approved for use for induction and maintenance in moderate-severe ulcerative colitis in many parts of the world.^{49,52} JAKi can be effective therapies for moderate-severe IBD that is refractory to treatment with prior biological agents; however, the major concerns regarding Tofacitinib are in relation to excess rates of serious infections, herpes zoster infections and adverse cardiovascular events (Figure 1).⁶⁸

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Upadacitinib (UPA) is a JAK1 selective oral small molecule drug that has recently been approved for use in both UC and CD following the results of the pivotal phase 3 studies which demonstrated superior efficacy of UPA with placebo.^{50,51} The results from these studies suggest a benefit with UPA for the treatment of extraintestinal manifestations that requires ongoing investigation in the long-term extension phase of these trials.^{51,69} Filgotinib is an oral JAK1 preferential inhibitor that has also shown benefit as induction and maintenance treatment in moderate-severe UC.⁵³ JAK1 selectivity is hoped to limit the off-target effects of JAKi to improve their overall safety profile.⁷⁰ Early safety data from the U-ACHIEVE, U-ENDURE, and SELECTION trials have shown reduced rates of adverse events with JAK1 selective inhibitors compared to those seen for tofacitinib.^{50,51,53} The utility and safety of JAKi in for the treatment of moderate to severe IBD in paediatric patients remains to be determined.

Given the rapid onset of action of JAKi and the reduced susceptibility of small molecules to drug loss associated with hypalbuminaemia and colonic protein loss, there is ongoing debate regarding their utility in the management of acute severe colitis.⁷¹ This is not yet an approved indication for this class of medication but multiple case series have highlighted the benefits of tofacitinib as rescue therapy for acute severe colitis, including in those with corticosteroid and anti-TNF refractory disease.^{71–74} Larger, prospective trials are required before this can be considered an approved indication for Jaki.

Subcutaneous infliximab and vedolizumab

Infliximab was the first biological agent approved for use in IBD but requires regular intravenous infusions which may be inconvenient for patients and challenging to facilitate in healthcare systems.^{39,75,76} Biosimilars to infliximab such as CT-P13 have subsequently been developed which have shown efficacy in IBD.^{77–79} Subcutaneous versions of this biosimilar (CT-P13 SC) have been shown to have a stable pharmacokinetic profile with reduced rates of clinically significant immunogenicity (neutralising antibodies) compared to intravenous preparations.^{78,80} The efficacy of CT-P13 SC for maintenance therapy (following intravenous induction doses at Weeks 0, 2 and 6) is under ongoing investigation in the global phase 3 LIBERTY-CD and LIBERTY-UC trials.^{81,82}

Vedolizumab offers gut-selective blockade of lymphocyte trafficking (anti-integrin) that is administered intravenously and currently available for use as a first or second line agent for CD and UC in New Zealand.^{40,41} Subcutaneous preparations of vedolizumab (q2wkly after intravenous induction at Weeks 0 and 2) have been shown to be effective maintenance therapy for individuals with moderate-to-severe UC and CD.^{83,84} There were no new safety concerns reported with subcutaneous preparations in these trials and efficacy was greater in anti-TNF naïve patients compared to those previously exposed to anti-TNF agents.^{83,84}

Interleukin-23 (IL-23) p19 inhibitors – Guselkumab, Risankizumab, Mirikizumab

Interleukin-23 is believed to maintain the intestinal inflammation seen in IBD.⁸⁵ Blockade of this pathway is exploited by medications such as ustekinumab that are currently available for use in New Zealand as second line biologic agents for moderate-severe CD and UC.^{42,43} There has been considerable drug development in relation to antagonism of the p19 subunit of IL23 in inflammatory disorders including IBD. Risankizumab, mirikizumab and guselkumab are all in various stages of phase 2/3 development for CD and UC.^{44–46} These agents require intravenous induction followed by subcutaneous injections for maintenance therapy at various dose intervals (Risankizumab – q8wk, Mirikizumab – q4wk, Guselkumab – q8wk). Most of the cohorts recruited in these studies required an inadequate response or intolerance to prior conventional or biological therapies. Early safety data from these studies show limited serious adverse events compared with placebo.^{44–46,86} The utility of these agents in the treatment of fistulising and perianal Crohn's disease and extra-intestinal manifestations remains to be determined.

S1P receptor modulators – Ozanimod, Etrasimod

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Sphingosine-1-phosphate (S1P) receptor modulation leads to internalization of S1P1 receptors in lymphocytes and prevents mobilization of lymphocytes to inflammatory sites.^{87,88} Ozanimod and etrasimod are oral S1P receptor modulators that have been shown to be effective for induction and maintenance therapy in patients with moderate-severe UC, including individuals with previous exposure to other biological agents.^{47,48} Although these agents are well tolerated in general, bradycardia, lymphopenia, macular oedema (although rare), and liver transaminitis are the main safety issues that require consideration.^{47,48,89,90} These agents are currently under ongoing investigation for the treatment of moderate-severe CD.

Combining biological therapies

Despite the increasing number of biological and small molecule agents that have been developed for the treatment of IBD over the past 20 years, a very real therapeutic ceiling exists regarding their efficacy. Clinical remission rates for medical IBD therapies seldom exceeds a therapeutic delta (difference between placebo and study drug) of 40%, except for UPA for moderate-severe UC.^{50,65} Randomized, controlled studies are currently underway to examine the benefit of using various combinations of biological agents. Early reports from the VEGA study which investigated guselkumab plus golimumab (anti-TNF agent) combination therapy versus each of these agents as monotherapy in patients with moderate-severe UC showed some benefits with the combination strategy.⁹¹ In this study, rates of endoscopic improvement, endoscopic normalisation and mucosal healing (histological remission and endoscopic normalisation) were greater at 38 weeks of follow up in the combination group compared to those who received monotherapy.⁹¹ Although rates of clinical remission did not differ significantly between groups, this endpoint requires ongoing investigation and follow-up to assess the robustness of treatment responses in each arm.⁹¹ Importantly, rates of adverse events were similar between groups suggesting that combination strategies may be safe and warrant ongoing investigation.⁹¹

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Table 1. Data from Phase 3, randomized, controlled studies of medications for the treatment of moderate-to-severe inflammatory bowel disease that are on the horizon for New Zealand.

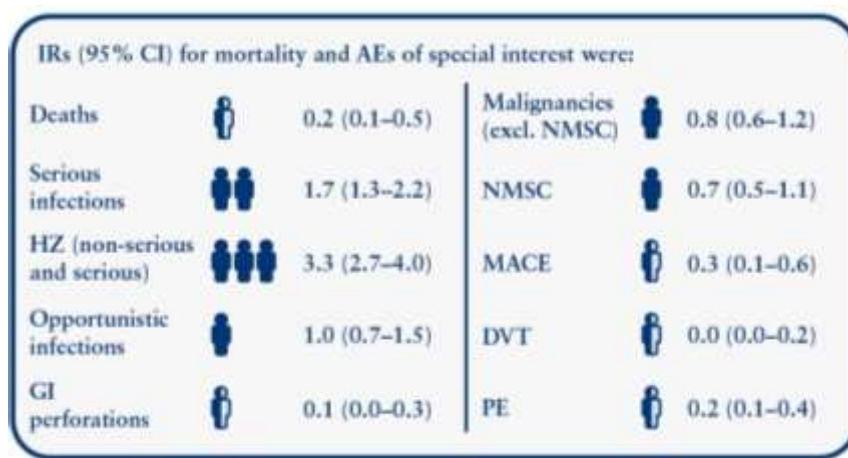
<i>Therapeutic agent</i>	<i>Onset of action</i>	<i>Clinical remission rates</i>	<i>Endoscopic remission rates</i>	<i>Use for extraintestinal manifestations</i>	<i>Safety issues</i>
Subcutaneous infliximab biosimilar (CTP-13 SC) – Ulcerative colitis ⁸¹	Weeks	Wk 54 - Placebo 20.8% - 120mg 43.2%	Not yet reported	Unclear (+ for infliximab IV)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No new safety signals
Subcutaneous infliximab biosimilar (CTP-13 SC) – Crohn’s disease ⁸²	Weeks	Wk 54 - Placebo 32.1% - 120mg 62.3%	Wk 54 - Placebo 10.7% - 120mg 34.6%	Unclear (+ for infliximab IV)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No new safety signals
Subcutaneous vedolizumab – Ulcerative colitis ⁸³	Weeks to months	Wk 52 - Placebo 14.3% - IV 42.6% - SC 46.2%	Wk 52 - Placebo 12.5% - IV 27.8% - SC 29.2%	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No new safety signals
Subcutaneous vedolizumab – Crohn’s disease ⁸⁴	Weeks to months	Wk 52 - Placebo 34.3% - SC 48%	Not reported	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No new safety signals
Tofacitinib (oral) – Ulcerative colitis ^{49,68,92,93}	Days to weeks	Wk 52 - Placebo 11% - 5mg BD 34.3% - 10mg BD 40.6%	Wk 52 - Placebo 4.0% - 5mg BD 14.6% - 10mg BD 16.8%	+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serious infection • Herpes zoster • Major cardiovascular events • Thromboembolic events
Upadacitinib (oral) – Ulcerative colitis ^{50,69}	Days to weeks	Wk 52 - Placebo 12% - 15mg 42% - 30mg 52%	Wk 52 - Placebo 6% - 15mg 24% - 30mg 26%	+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No significant differences to placebo although no long term follow up available
Upadacitinib (oral) – Crohn’s disease ⁵¹	Days to weeks	Wk 52 - Placebo 15.1% - 15mg 37.3% - 30mg 47.6%	Wk 52 - Placebo 5.5% - 15mg 19.1% - 30mg 28.6%	+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Herpes zoster • Neutropenia • Hepatic dysfunction
Filgotinib (oral) – Ulcerative colitis ^{53,94}	Weeks	Wk 58 - Placebo 11.2-13.5% - 100mg 23.8% - 200mg 37.2%	Wk 58 - Placebo 6.1-7.9% - 100mg 8.7% - 200mg 18.1%	+(arthritis)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No significant differences to placebo although long-term follow up not yet available
Risankizumab (IV/SC) – Crohn’s disease ⁴⁴	Weeks	Wk 52 - Placebo 40.9% - 180mg 55.4% - 360mg 52.5%	Wk 52 - Placebo 13% - 180mg 30% - 360mg 39%	Unclear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No significant differences to placebo
Mirikizumab (IV/SC)	Weeks	Wk 40	Wk 40	Unclear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infusion/injection reaction

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<i>Therapeutic agent</i>	<i>Onset of action</i>	<i>Clinical remission rates</i>	<i>Endoscopic remission rates</i>	<i>Use for extraintestinal manifestations</i>	<i>Safety issues</i>
– Ulcerative colitis ⁸⁶		- Placebo 25.1% - 200mg 49.1%	- Placebo 29.1% - 200mg 58.6%		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deranged liver function tests • Higher rates of depression noted in Mirikizumab group • Increased rates of opportunistic infections in Mirikizumab group vs. placebo
Ozanimod (oral) – Ulcerative colitis ^{47,89,95}	Weeks to months	Wk 52 - Placebo 18.5% - 1mg 37.0%	Mucosal healing (Wk52) - Placebo 14.1% - 1mg 29.6%	Unclear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bradycardia • Lymphopenia • Macular oedema • Elevated liver transaminases
Etrasimod (oral) – Ulcerative colitis ⁴⁸	Weeks	Wk 52 - Placebo 7% - 2mg 32%	Endoscopic improvement-histological remission (Wk 52) - Placebo 10% - 2mg 27%	Unclear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bradycardia • Lymphopenia • Macular oedema • Elevated liver transaminases

Wk, week; IV, intravenous; SC, subcutaneous

Figure 1. Safety profile of Tofacitinib for the treatment of ulcerative colitis in individuals with up to 7.8 years of safety data.⁶⁸



IR, incidence rate; HZ, herpes zoster; GI, gastrointestinal; NMSC, non-melanoma skin cancer; MACE, major adverse cardiovascular event; DVT, deep vein thrombosis; PE, pulmonary embolism.

Adapted from: Sandborn WJ, D’Haens GR, Sands BE, et al. Tofacitinib for the Treatment of Ulcerative Colitis: An Integrated Summary of up to 7.8 Years of Safety Data from the Global Clinical Programme. *J Crohns Colitis*. 2023 Mar 1;17(3):338–51.

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