

A Randomized, Double-Blind, Placebo-Controlled Trial of Modafinil for Negative Symptoms in Schizophrenia

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Objective: Negative symptoms are core features of schizophrenia that are functionally debilitating, associated with poor outcomes, and resistant to existing pharmacotherapies. We performed a randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled study of modafinil, a medication approved for the treatment of excessive daytime sleepiness, to explore its efficacy as an adjunctive therapy for negative symptoms in schizophrenia.

Method: Twenty subjects with DSM-IV schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder were randomly assigned to double-blind treatment with modafinil or placebo for 8 weeks. The study ran from March 2002 through March 2006. Outcome measures included the Scale for the Assessment of Negative Symptoms (SANS), Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale (BPRS), Clinical Global Impressions (CGI) scale, Quality of Life Interview, neurocognitive assessments (California Verbal Learning Test, Degraded Performance-Continuous Performance Test, Trail-Making Test B), and somatic measures (sleep, weight, side effects).

Results: Modafinil treatment was associated with a greater rate (CGI-Improvement [CGI-I] score ≤ 3 , 7/10 vs. 1/10) and degree (mean CGI-I score, 3.2 vs. 4.1) of global improvement at study endpoint compared with placebo. However, modafinil did not significantly improve global negative symptoms as measured by the total SANS or SANS individual global items. Modafinil did not significantly worsen psychopathology (according to the BPRS), compared with placebo, and was well tolerated.

Conclusions: Although no effect on negative symptoms was found, adjunctive therapy with modafinil may result in global improvements in patients with schizophrenia who have prominent negative symptoms.

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Negative symptoms of schizophrenia (affective flattening, alogia, avolition) were recognized as a core feature of the illness by both Emil Kraepelin and Eugen Bleuler nearly a century ago. Although historically neglected in clinical research, negative symptoms are now considered distinct and important targets of pharmacotherapy given that they are functionally debilitating, associated with poor overall outcome, and only modestly responsive to antipsychotic treatment.^{1–6} While the second-generation antipsychotic medications were heralded as having a greater therapeutic impact on negative symptoms than their conventional antipsychotic counterparts, the size of this effect is modest and may be largely attributable to the remediation of secondary negative symptoms (e.g., those attributable to positive symptoms, depression, or medication side effects such as sedation or extrapyramidal toxicity).^{7,8} In contrast, several studies have concluded that second-generation antipsychotics are no better than conventional agents at treating primary negative symptoms when samples of patients meeting criteria for the “deficit syndrome” were assessed.^{9–12}

Antipsychotic augmentation directed at negative symptom improvement has been explored with mixed

success. Antidepressant therapy has yielded inconsistent results, while prodopaminergic strategies, such as amphetamine or L-dopa, have been shown to reduce negative symptoms but at the risk of positive symptom worsening.^{13,14} More recently, promising results have been demonstrated with proglutamatergic agents such as glycine and D-cycloserine,^{15,16} although a larger trial found no advantage with either agent compared with placebo.¹⁷ The lack of medications with proven efficacy for negative symptoms therefore remains a gaping hole in the pharmacotherapy of schizophrenia, with investigation and development of newer therapies desperately needed.²

Modafinil is a wakefulness-promoting agent that is currently marketed for the treatment of excessive daytime sleepiness associated with narcolepsy, obstructive sleep apnea, and shift-work sleep disorder. Its mechanism of action is unclear, with negligible affinity for dopaminergic, adrenergic, or serotonergic receptors, but the ability to increase glutamate in rats and activate hypothalamic orexins.^{18,19} In several different clinical trials, modafinil has been shown to improve daytime sleepiness, fatigue, mood, short-term memory, reaction time, and quality of life in patients with narcolepsy.^{20–22} Modafinil has likewise been reported to improve fatigue and sedation in a variety of off-label conditions including neurologic disorders,^{23–25} antipsychotic-induced sedation,^{25,26} and major depression.^{27,28} Within schizophrenia, modafinil has been suggested to have a benefit in fatigue and possibly neurocognitive deficits.^{29–31} Taken together, these findings highlight the potential for modafinil to impact negative symptoms in schizophrenia. This potential has been explored with positive findings in an anecdotal report³² and in a small, 4-week, open-label study,³³ but to date no placebo-controlled trial has yet been published. Of concern, case reports have documented a possible role of modafinil in exacerbating psychosis or causing the emergence of clozapine-associated side effects in clozapine-treated patients.^{34,35}

Given this clinical rationale, we performed a double-blind, placebo-controlled trial to test the efficacy of modafinil for the treatment of negative symptoms in schizophrenia. We hypothesized that modafinil would result in greater negative symptom improvements compared with placebo. We also examined for a potential effect of modafinil on sleep, weight, and neurocognition.

METHOD

Study Participants

Subjects were recruited from the outpatient clinics of the VA West Los Angeles Medical Center. Inclusion criteria were (1) age 18–65; (2) DSM-IV criteria for schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder, based on the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV (SCID)³⁶; (3) subjects taking stable doses of antipsychotic medication

(no change in dose in the preceding 4 weeks); (4) positive symptom severity ≤ 14 on the Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale (BPRS)³⁷ psychosis factor (sum of 4 items: suspiciousness, unusual thought content, hallucinatory behavior, conceptual disorganization); (5) negative symptom severity ≥ 20 on the Scale for the Assessment of Negative Symptoms (SANS)³⁸ total score and ≥ 2 on either the affective flattening or alogia global item; (6) no substance dependence in the 6 months prior to study; (7) no serious medical illness; (8) no concomitant use of monoamine oxidase inhibitors; and (9) no women of childbearing potential. The study, which was conducted from March 2002 through March 2006, received institutional review board approval, and all subjects signed informed consent and demonstrated their ability to provide consent by passing a quiz testing their knowledge of the consent process.³⁹

Study Procedure and Assessment Measures

Subjects signing informed consent were screened for eligibility. If they met study criteria for participation, subjects were randomly assigned to either modafinil or placebo, initiated at 1 tablet daily of either modafinil 100 mg or placebo. After the first week, the dose was increased to a maximum dose of either 2 tablets daily of modafinil 100 mg or placebo. Thereafter, doses could be reduced back to 1 tablet daily of modafinil 100 mg or placebo in the event of tolerability issues. Subjects continued taking whatever antipsychotic medication they had been taking prior to the study.

The Schedule for the Deficit Syndrome (SDS),⁴⁰ a scale that assesses for the presence of primary negative symptoms within the deficit syndrome, was administered at baseline by a trained independent rater, with all other ratings made by raters blinded to the SDS results. Double-blind assessments were performed at baseline and every 2 weeks thereafter using the following instruments: SANS (18-item version, without attentional items), BPRS, Clinical Global Impressions (CGI) scale,⁴¹ Simpson-Angus Scale,⁴² Barnes Akathisia Scale,⁴³ and the Abnormal Involuntary Movement Scale.⁴¹ In addition, the Quality of Life Interview (QoLI)⁴⁴ and a brief neurocognitive battery with tests (Trail-Making Test B [TMT-B],⁴⁵ California Verbal Learning Test [CVLT],⁴⁶ Degraded Stimulus-Continuous Performance Test [DS-CPT]⁴⁷) selected based on deficits found to be associated with negative symptoms⁴⁸ were administered at baseline and at 8-week study endpoint. Vital signs, routine laboratory tests, and subjective reports of side effects, as well as the number of hours spent sleeping during the day and night, were monitored on a weekly basis. Subjects were compensated \$10 per visit for weekly study participation. In order to enhance recruitment, all subjects were offered participation in an additional 8 weeks of open-label treatment with modafinil if they completed the 8-week, double-blind study.

Table 1. Baseline Characteristics, Endpoint Medication Dose, and Study Dropout Rate by Treatment Group

Variable	Placebo (N = 10)	Modafinil (N = 10)
Age, mean \pm SD, y	49.8 \pm 7.0	49.7 \pm 6.8
Sex, N		
Male	9	10
Female	1	0
Ethnicity, N		
White	4	6
African American	4	3
Latino	2	0
Asian	0	1
Current depression, N	1	2
Antidepressant treatment, N	6	6
Deficit syndrome, N	5	5
Modafinil/placebo dose, mean \pm SD, mg/d	180 \pm 42	180 \pm 42
Study dropout, N	2	1

Statistical Analyses

Baseline characteristics of the 2 treatment groups were compared using either *t* tests or χ^2 tests. The primary outcome measure was the change in total SANS score, while secondary outcome measures included SANS subscale, BPRS, CGI-Severity of Illness (CGI-S), CGI-Improvement (CGI-I), and QoLI scores; CVLT (no. of words); DS-CPT (A'); TMT-B (seconds); weight (lb); and sleep (reported no. of hours during day and night). Between-group comparisons were performed using last-observation-carried-forward (LOCF) repeated-measures analysis of variance, testing for the interaction of time and treatment group. For the CGI-I score (not measured at baseline), between-group comparison was analyzed using the *t* test. Subjects were also dichotomized into those with and without clinical improvement, based on the CGI-I score (CGI-I \leq 3), with between-group comparisons performed using χ^2 analysis. Post hoc analyses using analysis of covariance were performed on SANS outcomes, with SDS results (deficit syndrome or not) and concomitant antidepressant status (yes or no) entered as covariates.

RESULTS

Twenty-six subjects signed informed consent to participate in the study. Three subjects failed to meet study criteria for participation, 1 withdrew consent, and 1 was lost to follow-up prior to baseline evaluation; these subjects were therefore not randomly assigned to study medication. Of the 21 remaining subjects who were randomly assigned to medication, 1 subject assigned to modafinil withdrew consent prior to taking any medication. Data from 20 randomly assigned subjects (N = 10 for modafinil, N = 10 for placebo) were therefore included in the study analysis.

Baseline demographic measures were similar, with no significant differences between treatment groups in terms

of age, sex, ethnicity, percent taking concomitant antidepressant medication, or percent meeting SDS criteria for the deficit syndrome (Table 1). The majority (N = 15) of subjects were taking second-generation antipsychotic medications, 3 were taking clozapine, 2 were taking haloperidol, and 2 were taking concomitant divalproex sodium. Of the 20 subjects who started study medication, 17 (85%) completed double-blind treatment—all study dropouts occurred at the discretion of the investigator due to worsening of psychopathology (N = 2 for placebo, N = 1 for modafinil). There was no difference in medication dose between the 2 treatment groups at study endpoint (LOCF)—2 subjects in either group were being treated with 1 tablet daily (modafinil 100 mg or placebo), while all others tolerated the maximum 2 tablets daily (modafinil 200 mg or placebo).

Although mean total SANS and SANS subscale scores improved modestly in both treatment groups, there were no significant differences in SANS change between the modafinil and placebo groups (Table 2). A similar pattern was observed for the total BPRS score, with slight improvement in mean total scores noted for both treatment groups but with no significant between-group differences. In order to address possible differences in depressive symptom change between treatment groups, the BPRS depression item as well as the BPRS depression cluster (depression, guilt, anxiety) were compared, with no significant differences found. While there was also no significant difference in the change in the mean CGI-S score between groups, there was a significant difference in the mean endpoint CGI-I score, with modafinil-treated subjects having greater improvement (mean CGI-I score, 3.2 vs. 4.1; *t* = 3.35, *df* = 18, *p* = .004). When a cut-off score of \leq 3 on the CGI-I scale was used to dichotomize clinical improvement (on the CGI-I, a score of 4 or more indicates no improvement or worsening), there was a significantly greater proportion of responders in the modafinil group compared with placebo (7/10 vs. 1/10; χ^2 = 7.5, *df* = 1, *p* = .006) (Figure 1). There was no significant effect of either antidepressant status or deficit syndrome status on SANS or CGI outcome measures when these factors were analyzed with analysis of covariance. Both factors were evenly distributed between treatment groups (Table 1).

There were no significant differences in neurocognitive test score changes (CVLT, DS-CPT, TMT-B) between the 2 treatment groups. Modafinil-treated patients reported greater reductions in mean hours of daytime and nighttime sleep and experienced a greater degree of mean weight loss compared with placebo-treated patients, but these differences also failed to reach statistical significance (Table 3). There were no significant differences in baseline-to-endpoint changes in extrapyramidal symptoms, glucose, or lipids. For modafinil-treated subjects, reported side effects were infrequent but included edema (N = 1), tinnitus (N = 1), and a bitter taste (N = 1).

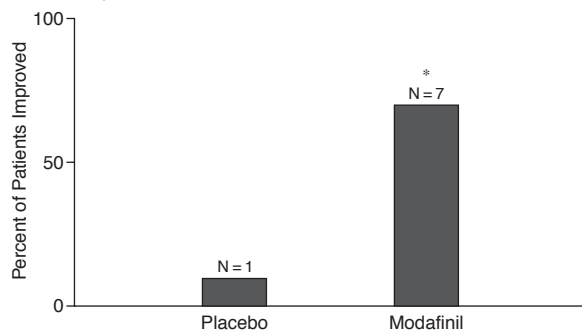
Table 2. Psychopathology Scores and Cognitive and Somatic Measures at Baseline and Endpoint by Treatment Group

Variable	Placebo		Modafinil		Effect Size
	Baseline, Mean ± SD	Endpoint, Mean ± SD	Baseline, Mean ± SD	Endpoint, Mean ± SD	
Psychopathology scores					
SANS total	38.5 ± 8.4	36.1 ± 7.7	38.2 ± 7.6	36.0 ± 7.7	0.02
SANS alogia	2.2 ± 1.3	2.0 ± 1.1	2.4 ± 1.1	2.4 ± 1.2	0.14
SANS affective flattening	3.0 ± 0.8	2.6 ± 0.5	2.8 ± 0.8	2.6 ± 1.0	0.27
SANS avolition-apathy	3.1 ± 0.7	2.6 ± 0.7	3.6 ± 0.7	2.9 ± 0.7	0.33
SANS anhedonia-asociality	3.4 ± 0.7	3.3 ± 0.9	3.3 ± 0.7	3.0 ± 0.8	0.25
BPRS	40.6 ± 4.5	37.8 ± 4.2	37.6 ± 8.2	34.4 ± 7.0	0.07
CGI-S	4.0 ± 0.7	4.1 ± 0.6	3.9 ± 0.7	3.6 ± 0.8	0.64
CGI-I ^a	NA	4.1 ± 0.6	NA	3.2 ± 0.6	1.50
QoLI	4.4 ± 1.2	4.2 ± 1.3	3.9 ± 1.4	4.0 ± 0.9	0.22
Cognitive measures					
CVLT, words	36.6 ± 14.6	39.7 ± 21.1	39.2 ± 9.9	43.2 ± 9.5	0.11
DS-CPT, A'	0.94 ± 0.05	0.93 ± 0.05	0.92 ± 0.08	0.92 ± 0.08	0.14
TMT-B, s	150.0 ± 82.5	122.4 ± 55.9	139.9 ± 46.6	134.1 ± 73.6	0.74
Somatic measures					
Weight, lb	204.4 ± 29.8	205.2 ± 31.9	218.4 ± 45.3	215.5 ± 40.2	0.49
Sleep, night, h	7.1 ± 1.3	7.1 ± 1.2	8.2 ± 2.1	7.9 ± 2.2	0.24
Sleep, day, h	1.0 ± 0.8	0.6 ± 0.7	1.1 ± 1.0	0.3 ± 0.4	0.52

^at test: $t = 3.35$, $df = 18$, $p = .004$.

Abbreviations: BPRS = Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale, CGI-I = Clinical Global Impressions-Improvement scale, CGI-S = Clinical Global Impressions-Severity of Illness scale, CVLT = California Verbal Learning Test, DS-CPT = Degraded Stimulus-Continuous Performance Test, NA = not applicable, QoLI = Quality of Life Interview, SANS = Scale for the Assessment of Negative Symptoms, TMT-B = Trail-Making Test B.

Figure 1. Clinical Improvement (CGI-I ≤ 3) at Study Endpoint by Treatment Group



* $\chi^2 = 7.5$, $df = 1$, $p = .006$.

Abbreviation: CGI-I = Clinical Global Impressions-Improvement scale.

Table 3. Somatic Changes and Reported Adverse Events by Treatment Group

Variable	Placebo	Modafinil
Weight change, ^a lb	0.8	-2.9
Sleep change, h		
Night ^b	0.0	-0.3
Day ^c	-0.4	-0.8
No. of reported adverse events		
Psychosis worsening	2	1
Irritability	2	0
Insomnia	1	0
Infection	2	0
Edema	0	1
Tinnitus	0	1
Bitter taste	0	1

^aF = 1.0, $df = 14$, $p = .33$.

^bF = 0.25, $df = 14$, $p = .63$.

^cF = 1.23, $df = 18$, $p = .28$.

DISCUSSION

In contrast to other open-label reports,^{32,33} our preliminary, placebo-controlled trial did not reveal a greater impact on negative symptoms, as measured by the SANS, for modafinil compared with placebo. Such a negative finding is consistent with several other trials in which modafinil was, in the wake of positive open-label reports, not found to have a benefit on fatigue in a variety of conditions when compared with placebo under double-blind conditions.^{31,49,50} Still, given the small sample size of our study, type II error remains a possibility. It is likewise possible that modafinil doses beyond 200 mg/day could

be more effective—we limited the dose in order to minimize the risk of psychotic exacerbation.

We did find that modafinil was associated with a significantly greater degree of global improvement, as measured by the single-item CGI-I score, and a greater proportion of responders when CGI-I was used to dichotomize response. This was a robust finding that, in the absence of any detected difference on SANS measures, invites speculation. It is possible, for example, that modafinil treatment was associated with improvements in depressive symptoms not captured in the SANS ratings. However, this seems unlikely since only 3 subjects (2 in the modafinil group and 1 in the placebo group) had

active depression according to the SCID, and there were no significant differences in BPRS depression score changes between treatment groups. In addition, deficit syndrome status, as rated by the SDS, did not affect the improvement seen with modafinil treatment, suggesting that the benefit was not specific to those with secondary negative symptoms (e.g., due to comorbid depression). Anecdotally, several study subjects reported specific subjective improvements in anergia, anhedonia, and asociality. It is therefore also possible that a subjective negative symptom change may have been reflected in the CGI-I score but not in the SANS, in which rateable improvement often depends on an actual change in behavior or level of activity. Despite the established validity of the SANS, this and other existing negative symptom scales may be limited in their ability to detect subtle or very specific negative symptom changes.⁵¹ Among our sample of board and care-residing, financially strapped patients with chronic schizophrenia, it is possible that there were improvements in some negative symptoms but that circumstances (lack of money, social skills, or opportunities to be more active) prevented subjects from acting upon them. Future research might therefore pair modafinil and placebo with a psychosocial intervention in a 2 × 2 design that would provide subjects who experience pharmacologic improvement in negative symptoms with an avenue to facilitate the enactment of behavioral change.

A recent consensus meeting indicated that while negative symptoms and neurocognitive deficits appear to be intertwined, their precise relationship remains to be elucidated.^{2,52} We found no neurocognitive benefits with modafinil, looking at a fairly narrow range of deficits (episodic memory, attention, and frontal lobe function) reported to be associated with negative symptoms and the deficit syndrome.⁴⁸ This lack of cognitive improvement matches a recent report from another placebo-controlled trial.³¹ However, others have reported neurocognitive improvement with modafinil in schizophrenia,^{29,33} and it is possible that a more extensive cognitive battery or a sample of more severely impaired subjects might reveal specific domains responsive to treatment with modafinil.

Given concerns in the literature about possible modafinil-associated symptomatic worsening among patients treated with clozapine,^{34,35} we note that subjects in our study did not as a group experience worsening of psychosis, as reflected by mild mean improvements in BPRS scores regardless of treatment condition. There were 3 study dropouts due to psychotic worsening, but 2 of these occurred in the placebo-treated group. Of the 2 subjects taking clozapine, 1 was randomly assigned to modafinil but requested a dose reduction to 100 mg/day after week 4 due to complaints of activation. This same patient developed unilateral lower extremity edema due to a Baker's cyst. Overall, however, modafinil was well tolerated, with few side effects reported in this trial.

In conclusion, this small, exploratory, double-blind study did not demonstrate a significant benefit for adjunctive modafinil in the treatment of core negative symptoms in schizophrenia. For these symptoms, there remains no treatment with proven efficacy. Modafinil may, however, result in global clinical improvement in patients with prominent negative symptoms, and larger studies incorporating nonpharmacologic interventions might yet reveal a therapeutic niche for modafinil in schizophrenia.

Drug names: clozapine (Clozaril, FazaClo, and others), divalproex (Depakote), modafinil (Provigil).

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