

Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Priorities Forum Statement

Number: 14
SUBJECT: Occipital Nerve Stimulation for the Treatment of Headaches
Date of decision: December 2011
Date of review: December 2012

Guidance

Occipital nerve stimulation (ONS) is a relatively recent non-destructive, reversible neuromodulatory procedure which has been used in the treatment of headaches. It has been used in patients with a history of being unresponsive to conventional treatments.

Early reports of stimulation in this area involved an open approach to the C2 and C3 nerves (i.e. the greater and lesser occipital nerves). A more recent approach is the subcutaneous placement of a stimulating electrode just beneath the skin at the C1 level and positioning the electrodes over the C2 and C3 nerves as they ascend to the skull. The electrode is introduced through a hollow tunnelling needle. However, a common complication of this method is electrode migration. Anchoring of the electrode at the distal and proximal ends can limit this.

There is no NICE guidance on the use of ONS. The British Association for the Study of Headache (BASH) and The US Headache Consortium have not addressed its use in the treatment of headache.

The number of case studies currently reported is not adequate to conclude that this treatment may be effective. The length of follow-up has tended to be short and long-term follow-up is needed to reach a definitive conclusion about the treatment's effectiveness. A large series with long-term follow-up reported by the same investigators would be valuable in terms of its clinical and neuro-physiological aspects.

Recommendation

Occipital Nerve Stimulation for the treatment of headache should only be approved as part of a clinical trial (i.e. funded through research and development budgets).

The Human Rights Act has been considered in the formation of this guidance statement.