VIA MEDICA

Artykuł przeglądowy / Review article

Biuletyn Polskiego
Towarzystwa Onkologicznego
NOWOTWORY
2022, tom 7, nr 4, 270–280

ISSN 2543–5248, e-ISSN: 2543–8077
www.nowotwory.edu.pl

# Principles of prevention and management of adverse events of immunomodulatory drugs in the treatment of multiple myeloma

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Over the past 15 years, significant progress has been made in understanding the biology and treatment of multiple myeloma (MM). This is due to the introduction of new therapies and new applications of known drugs associated with a better understanding of how to optimize treatment to patient and disease characteristics. Indeed, 15 new drugs have been approved over this time period. Immunomodulatory drugs (IMiDs) have been used in the treatment of MM for over 20 years. Initially, it was thalidomide, then analogues lenalidomide and pomalidomide; in the future, cereblon E3 ligase modulators CelMoDs, such as iberdomide and CC-480. Currently, IMiDs are mainly used as the backbone of multi-drug protocols, including in combination with monoclonal antibodies and proteasome inhibitors. Given the common utilization of IMiDs in the management of MM, it is relevant to review the safety profile of IMiDs and the management of adverse events (AEs).

**Key words:** adverse events, immunomodulatory drugs, lenalidomide, management, multiple myeloma, pomalidomide, thalidomide, treatment

## Introduction

Immunomodulatory drugs (IMiDs) have significantly improved survival in patients with multiple myeloma (MM) over the past 20 years. That said, only 10–15% of MM patients meet or exceed life expectancy compared to the matched general population [1]. There are three IMiDs commonly used in clinical practice: thalidomide, lenalidomide, and pomalidomide. Immunomodulating drugs are oral drugs that have unique mechanisms of action, including anti-cancer and anti-inflammatory effects, and affect the human immune system [2].

The mechanism of action of IMiDs in MM cells was initially considered a process of anti-angiogenesis [3]. After that, direct and indirect anti-tumor activity was demonstrated by immunomodulation. In 2010, the anti-MM activity of the IMiDs was mediated by the inhibition of cereblon (CRBN), a protein that dictates the substrate specificity of CRL4CRBN E3 ubiquitin ligase [4–6]. By binding the CRL4CRBN E3 ligase, the proteins associated with the disease are ubiquitinated and degraded. The key neosubstrates in plasma cells (PCs) are transcription factors – the Ikaros (IKZF1) and Aiolos (IKZF3) proteins [7, 8]. IMiDs degrade Ikaros and Aiolos *via* CRBN-dependent ubiquitination, leading to the downregulation of IRF4 and MYC [9]. In addition to their direct anti-MM activity, IMiDs show indirect anti-MM activity, inhibiting the secretion of pro-in-

**Jak cytować / How to cite:**

Charliński G, Vesole DH, Jurczyszyn A. ***Principles of prevention and management of adverse events of immunomodulatory drugs in the treatment of multiple myeloma.*** *NOWOTWORY J Oncol* 2022; 72: 231–241.

flammatory cytokines, including tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α), interleukin (IL) – 1, IL-6, IL-12, and IL-16, which leads to the inhibition of proliferation and migration of neoplastic PCs and apoptosis [10]. Lenalidomide and pomalidomide induce malignant PCs apoptosis more potently by activating tumor suppressor genes than thalidomide. In preclinical studies, lenalidomide and pomalidomide were 300–1200 times more potent than thalidomide in T-cell costimulation [11, 12]. Both lenalidomide and pomalidomide increase the action of NK cells in destroying PCs. Lenalidomide additionally activates NKT cells [13, 14]. Cereblon E3 ligase modulators (CELMoDs), compared to IMiDs, have a greater affinity for CRBN and a more decisive influence on the degradation of Ikaros and Aiolos, which results in a stronger anti-MM and immunomodulatory effect [15, 16]. This is the fundamental difference between the two groups of drugs.

Despite the similarities in their chemical structure, the IMiDs differ in their adverse event (AE) profile and exhibit only moderate cross-reactivity, and can be used sequentially in subsequent lines of MM treatment. Currently, these drugs are considered a standard backbone in the induction therapy of transplant and non-transplant eligible patients, post-autologous stem cell transplantation (ASCT) consolidation and maintenance therapy, and in the treatment of relapsed/refractory MM (RRMM).

Thalidomide (α-N-phthalimido-glutarimide) has been used to treat MM for over 20 years [17]. Thalidomide shows synergy *in vitro* with other drugs and has become an integral component of many combinations of MM treatment. In the European Union (EU), the European Medicines Agency (EMA) approved thalidomide in combination with melphalan and prednisone (MPT), MPT with daratumumab (Dara-MPT), and with daratumumab, bortezomib, and dexamethasone (Dara-VTD) for the treatment of newly diagnosed MM (NDMM). The AEs observed during treatment with thalidomide favored the development of thalidomide analogs with greater immunomodulatory activity and a better safety profile [18]. A modification of the chemical structure led to the formulation of lenalidomide and pomalidomide.

Lenalidomide is an analogue of thalidomide that is commonly used in the treatment of MM. In the EU, the EMA approved lenalidomide in combination with dexamethasone (Rd), daratumumab and dexamethasone (Dara-Rd), bortezomib and dexamethasone (VRd), and melphalan and prednisone (MPR) for the treatment of NDMM. In Poland, lenalidomide can treat NDMM under the Ministry of Health drug program criteria based on the Rd and VRd chemotherapy protocols [19]. Lenalidomide monotherapy for maintenance treatment after ASCT is also EMA approved. In addition, the EMA approved lenalidomide for the treatment of RRMM, in combination with dexamethasone, and Rd in combination with carfilzomib (KRd), ixasomib (Ixa-Rd), Dara-Rd, and elotuzumab (Elo-Rd). In Poland, in the treatment of RRMM, lenalidomide treatment is approved following the criteria of the Ministry of Health drug program under the Rd, KRd, Ixa-Rd chemotherapy protocols [19].

Pomalidomide is another thalidomide analogue with direct antiproliferative, pro-apoptotic, and anti-angiogenic effects. It has a modulating effect on bone resorption and the immune system [20]. The EMA has approved pomalidomide and dexamethasone (Pd) remove for the treatment of RRMM in combination with bortezomib (PVd), isatuximab (Isa-Pd), and elotuzumab (Elo-Pd). In Poland, in the treatment of RRMM, the combination of Pd and PVd is approved under the Ministry of Health drug program [19]. A comparison of the chemical structure, dosing, and mechanism of action of IMiDs is presented in table I [21].

The AEs observed in patients with MM result from both the neoplastic disease and the anti-MM treatment used and comorbidities. For this reason, it is not easy to ascribe specific AEs to specific drugs. In clinical practice, the Common Terminology Criteria (CTC) for AEs classification is most often used to identify AEs [22]. Common to all IMiDs is their potential teratogenic effect, which can result in severe, life-threatening congenital malformations (e.g., phocomelia). For this reason, unless there is reliable evidence that they cannot become pregnant, all patients must meet the conditions of the pregnancy prevention program before starting treatment with IMiDs [23].

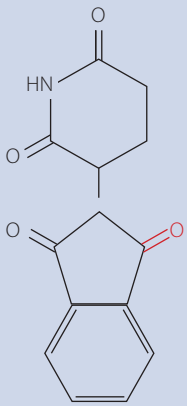
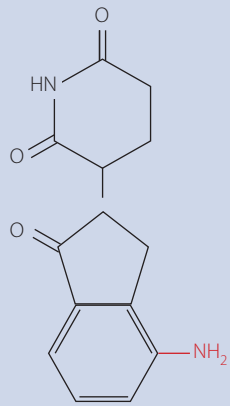
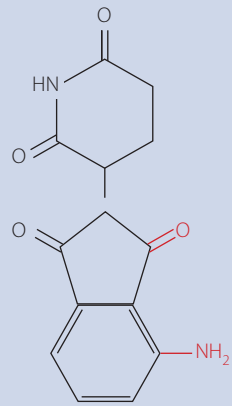
Due to the results of phase 3 clinical trials, IMiDs are currently used mainly in multi-drug combinations with new drugs, including monoclonal antibodies (daratumumab, elotuzumab, isatuximab) and proteasome inhibitors (bortezomib, carfilzomib, ixazomib). We review the AEs reported in the latest phase 3 clinical trials and their management principles.

## Thalidomide

So far, thalidomide has been the main IMiD used in the treatment of patients with NDMM in Poland. In ASCT eligible patients, thalidomide is used with bortezomib and dexamethasone (VTD) and VTD in combination with daratumumab. In the most recent EHA-ESMO recommendations issued in 2021, thalidomide is not recommended for patients with NDMM who are ineligible for ASCT [24].

The AEs of thalidomide depend on the dose and duration of treatment and the presence of comorbidities. The most common serious AEs of thalidomide include constipation, peripheral neuropathy (PN), somnolence, depression, and venous thromboembolism (VTE). Depending on the treatment regimen (monotherapy versus multi-drug combinations), the frequency of AEs is variable [25]. In randomized phase 3 clinical trials utilizing VTD induction therapy for NDMM before ASCT, the most common causes of hematological AEs, include neutropenia (15–19% of patients). In contrast, the most common non-hematological AEs are infections and PN [26, 27]. The combination of VTD and Dara-VTD in induction therapy before ASCT compared to VTD increases the incidence of serious hematological AEs, including neutropenia (grade 3–4: 28%

**Table I.** Comparison of the mechanisms of action and chemical structure of immunomodulatory drugs

| | Thalidomide | Lenalidomide | Pomalidomide |
|---|---|---|---|
| chemical structure |  |  |  |
| daily dose | 50–200 mg | 2.5–25 mg | 1–4 mg |
| dose modification depending on RI | no dose modification needed | CrCl (ml/min) / daily dose: >60 / 25 mg; 30–59 / 10 mg; 15–29 / 15 mg every other day; <15 / 5 mg; on dialysis / 5 mg | no dose modification needed |
| relative potency ± potency factor of 10 | | | |
| CD4+ and CD8+ T-cell co-stimulation | + | ++++ | +++++ |
| tregs suppresion | – | + | + |
| Th1 cytokine production | + | ++++ | +++++ |
| NK and NKT cell activation | + | ++++ | +++++ |
| antibody-dependent cellular cytotoxicity | – | ++++ | ++++ |
| anti-angiogenesis | ++++ | +++ | +++ |
| anti-inflammatory properties | + | ++++ | +++++ |
| anti-proliferative activity | + | +++ | +++ |

CrCl – creatinine clearance; RI – renal impairment

*vs.* 15%) and thrombocytopenia (grade 3–4: 11% *vs.* 7%). There was no increase in the frequency of non-hematological serious AEs in the Dara-VTD group compared to the VTD group [28].

In patients not eligible for ASCT in first-line treatment, thalidomide is most often used in combination with melphalan and prednisone (MPT). The most common hematological AE was neutropenia, whereas the non-hematological AEs included infections, PN, VTE, and skin lesions (Stevens-Johnson syndrome and toxic epidermal necrolysis) [29, 30]. In some countries, thalidomide combined with cyclophosphamide and dexamethasone (CTD) was used as first-line treatment. The most frequently observed AEs in the phase 3 study, MRC Myeloma IX, were neutropenia (grade 3–4: 11%), infections (grade 3–4: 13%), and PN (grade 3–4: 7%) [31]. Table II summarizes the incidence of serious AEs from pivotal phase 3 clinical trials of thalidomide for the treatment of NDMM. Thalidomide has been well studied as post ASCT maintenance therapy. The most common AEs are PN and constipation [32, 33], thus limiting their *se* for long term treatment.

Currently, the role of thalidomide in the treatment of RRMM is limited. In this indication, thalidomide has been used as monotherapy, combined with dexamethasone (TD) and triplet regimens. Regardless of the regimen, the most common side effects AE's were somnolence (11–57%), constipation (16–75%), PN (6–23%), skin rashes (3–21%), cardiovascular disorders (bradycardia, arrhythmias, 2%), and VTE (3–7%) [34, 35]. Thalidomide when combined with cyclophosphamide has the additional hematologic AEs including neutropenia (grade 3–4: 86%), thrombocytopenia (grade 3–4: 30%), infection (grade 3–4: 26%) [36].

**Table II.** Incidence of serious adverse events of thalidomide in treatment of newly diagnosed multiple myeloma identified in pivotal phase 3 clinical trials

| Trial | Cavo et al. [26] | | IFM2013-04 [27] | | CASSIOPEIA [28] | | Myeloma MRC IX [31] | | The metanalysis of 6 randomized trials [30] | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| regimen | TD | VTD | VCD | VTD | VTD | Dara-VTD | CTD | MP | MPT | MP |
| **hematological adverse events, grade ≥3 (%)** | | | | | | | | | | |
| neutropenia | NA | NA | 33 | 19 | 15 | 28 | 11 | 15 | overall: 32 | overall: 29 |
| thrombocytopenia | 0 | 5 | 11 | 5 | 7 | 11 | NA | NA | | |
| anemia | NA | NA | 9 | 4 | NA | NA | NA | NA | | |
| **non-hematological adverse events, grade ≥3 (%)** | | | | | | | | | | |
| febrile neutropenia | | | | | | | | | | |
| infections | 3 | 1 | NR | NR | 20 | 22 | 13 | 7 | 13 | 9 |
| peripheral neuropathy | 0 | <1 | grade 2–4: 12.9 | grade 2–4: 21.9 | 9 | 9 | 7 | 2 | 15 | 3 |
| venous thromboembolism | <1 | <1 | 2 | 2 | NA | NA | 0 | 0 | 6 | 2 |
| constipation | <1 | <1 | NA | NA | 1 | 1 | 3 | 1.2 | NA | NA |
| skin rash | <1 | <1 | NA | NA | NA | NA | 2 | <1 | 3 | 1 |
| secondary malignancy (any grade) | NA | NA | NA | NA | 2 | 2 | NA | NA | NA | NA |

CTD – cyclophosphamide, thalidomide, dexamethasone; Dara-VTD – daratumumab, bortezomib, thalidomide, dexamethasone; MP – melphalan, prednisone; MPT – melphalan, prednisone, thalidomide; NA – not available; TD – thalidomide, dexamethasone; VCD – bortezomib, cyclophosphamide, dexamethasone; VTD – bortezomib, thalidomide, dexamethasone

### *Management of AEs during treatment with thalidomide*

The most common hematological AE in treatment with thalidomide is neutropenia. Anemia and thrombocytopenia are observed less frequently than neutropenia [23, 37]. For this reason, it is recommended to perform a blood count. When the absolute neutrophil count (ANC) is 0.5–1.0 G/L, reduce the thalidomide dose by 50% and consider the use of granulocyte colony-stimulating factor (G-CSF) when the ANC < 0.5 G/L treatment with thalidomide should be discontinued; if the ANC is more than 1.0 G/L, start treatment with a dose reduced by 50% with or without G-CSF [23]. Anemia and thrombocytopenia are less frequently observed than neutropenia [23, 37].

The most severe non-hematological undesirable effect of thalidomide treatment is PN. The incidence of PN is variable and is dependent on the dose and duration of therapy [38]. Some authors recommend treatment with thalidomide be limited to no more than six months [39]. Unfortunately, thalidomide-associated PN is often slow to resolve, if ever, and a substantial proportion of patients have some level of persistent PN. Therefore, during therapy with thalidomide, it is necessary to monitor for PN. Grade 1 PN does not require a reduction of the thalidomide dose; in grade 2, the dose of thalidomide should be reduced by 50%, and in grades 3 and 4, treatment with thalidomide should be discontinued until symptoms resolve or decrease to grade 1 [40].

The treatment for neuropathic pain is variable and challenging to manage, and the best management is to avoid the development of PN. One option is using agents which reduce neurotransmitter release: gabapentin (titrated up to 1200 mg three times daily) or pregabalin (titrated up to 300 mg twice daily). Alternative options include amitriptyline (10–100 mg daily), serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (venlafaxine, duloxetine), or anti-epileptic drugs (carbamazepine) [41]. Only 25% of patients completely recover from thalidomide-induced PN within 4–6 years [42].

Another non-hematological AEs of thalidomide (and all other IMiDs) treatment is VTE, which most often develops in the first three months and decreases after approximately 12 months [43]. During treatment with an IMiD, it is necessary to use anticoagulation prophylaxis adapted to the presence of risk factors, which include: age, immobility, obesity, history of VTE, presence of a central venous catheter, presence of comorbidities, hereditary thrombophilia, a large mass of MM tumor and treatment of high doses of dexamethasone, an anthracycline, or multi-drug chemotherapy [44]. According to the SAVED Score, the finding of at least two risk factors is an indication for treatment with enoxaparin 40 mg/day or warfarin (target International Normalized Ratio [INR]: 2–3). According to the SAVED Score, treatment with acetylsalicylic acid (ASA) 81–325 mg daily is recommended in patients with one risk factor [45–47]. Other drugs recommended are rivaroxaban 10 mg daily, apixaban 2.5 mg twice daily, and fondaparinux 2.5 mg daily.

A common side effect of thalidomide treatment is constipation, reported in 80–90% of patients. It develops early after

initiation of thalidomide treatment and most often affects elderly patients concomitantly treated with opioid analgesics. In patients starting thalidomide treatment, prophylactic use of low doses of stool softeners and/or laxatives is recommended. Should be adjusted treatment according to the severity of constipation. In the case of grade 3 or 4 constipation a 50% reduction in the daily dose of thalidomide is recommended. In constipation requiring the use of an enema, thalidomide treatment should be withheld until symptoms resolve. Prophylactic laxatives should be taken when treatment with thalidomide is resumed at a reduced dose [48, 49].

Common AEs of thalidomide include somnolence and fatigue. Mild drowsiness occurs in more than 75% of patients and severe (grade 3–4) in 5–10%. Daytime drowsiness may be reduced by taking the total daily dose of thalidomide in the evening. Hazardous tasks and the concomitant use of alcohol and medications that may make you feel drowsy should be avoided. If grade 3 somnolence interferes with normal activities of daily living, or if dementia, or a coma occurs, one should discontinue treatment until the toxicity has resolved. When re-treating, the daily dose of thalidomide should be reduced by 50%. Additionally, patients may report fatigue, weakness, difficulty concentrating, and mood changes [48].

Other non-hematological AEs include skin lesions observed in approximately 15% of patients, including about 1.5% of patients with grade ≥3 skin lesions [23]. The most common symptoms are pruritis and maculopapular rash. Alveolar lesions develop in 25% of patients treated with thalidomide in a dose >400 mg/day. Once the skin lesions have resolved, re-treatment of thalidomide may be considered at a reduced dose [23, 37]. After the skin lesions have resolved, may resume treatment with thalidomide at a reduced dose. If grade 1–2 dermatological AEs develops, treatment with thalidomide should be discontinued until the toxicity resolves or decreases to grade 1. Thalidomide should be suspended indefinitely in the event of severe exfoliative, macular, or bullous rash, or if Stevens-Johnson syndrome or toxic epidermal necrolysis is suspected. Medicines that may cause severe skin reactions, such as trimethoprim/sulfamethoxazole or allopurinol, should be avoided during treatment with thalidomide [23].

### *Renal impairment*

Dexamethasone protocol is a highly effective and widely used treatment of NDMM with renal impairment (RI), mainly in Europe. The use of thalidomide in combination with a high dose of dexamethasone (TD) improves renal function in 55–75% of patients with NDMM and about 60% of patients with RRMM [50, 51]. The use of thalidomide in the treatment of MM with RI does not increase the incidence of AEs. Therefore, there is no need to adjust the dose of thalidomide depending on RI [52]. This also applies to patients requiring dialysis. Patients undergoing dialysis require close monitoring as they may develop hyperkalemia. It is necessary to remember the necessity to use antithrombotic prophylaxis in this group of patients [43]. Thalidomide dosing by creatinine clearance (CrCl) is presented in table I.

## Lenalidomide

Lenalidomide is an IMiD that is approved for both NDMM and RRMM. Despite the high structural similarity to thalidomide, the two drugs have different safety profiles. The dominant AEs are hematological AEs resulting from the myelosuppressive effects of lenalidomide on the bone marrow [25]. Lenalidomide, unlike thalidomide, is renally cleared; therefore, RI increases the myelosuppressive effect of lenalidomide [53]. Unlike thalidomide, PN, constipation, and somnolence are rarely observed with lenalidomide treatment.

Lenalidomide may be associated with an increased risk of VTE. In a randomized phase 3 trial comparing Rd with lenalidomide in combination with high-dose dexamethasone (RD) in patients with NDMM, thromboprophylaxis was not mandatory until the first 266 patients were enrolled. More AEs were observed in the Rd group except grade 3–4 VTE, which was more common in the RD group (12% *vs.* 26%, respectively) [54]. Lenalidomide, when incorporated into multi-drug protocols, including in combination with dexamethasone and cyclophosphamide or liposomal doxorubicin, resulted in VTE in 14% and 9%, respectively) [55, 56].

The phase 3 FIRST study in NDMM compared lenalidomide in combination with dexamethasone for 18 cycles (Rd18) with continuous Rd – Rd(cont), and MPT [57]. In the group of patients treated with lenalidomide, hematological serious (grade 3–4) AEs were reported in the following proportion of patients: neutropenia in 26% and 30% of patients treated with Rd18 and Rd(cont), respectively; thrombocytopenia in 8% and 9% of patients, respectively, and neutropenia in 26%, and 30% of patients, respectively. The most common non-hematological serious (grade 3–4) AEs were infection (22% *vs.* 32%, respectively), VTE (4% *vs.* 5%, respectively) and pulmonary embolism (3% *vs.* 4%, respectively), thromboprophylaxis was included in the study), peripheral sensory neuropathy (<1% *vs.* 1%, respectively), diarrhea (3% *vs.* 5%, respectively) [57].

The use of VRd in NDMM compared to Rd does not increase serious (grade 3–4) hematological AEs but increases the risk of PN (grade 3–4: 35% *vs.* 11%, respectively) [58].

In the phase 3 MAIA trial, comparing Dara-Rd with Rd in transplant-ineligible NDMM, serious AEs were reported in 77% and 70% of patients, respectively. It is known that daratumumab is associated with neutropenia as a single agent. The most common serious (grade 3–4) AEs are neutropenia (54% *vs.* 37%, respectively), anemia (17% *vs.* 22%, respectively), lymphopenia (16% *vs.* 11%, respectively), and infections (32% *vs.* 23%, respectively) [59]. MPR compared with MPR with lenalidomide in maintenance therapy (MPR-R) in the treatment of NDMM is associated with a higher incidence of myelosuppression: neutropenia (grade 3–4) was found in 65% patients,

thrombocytopenia in more than 33%, and anemia in 25% patients [60]. Table III summarizes the incidence of serious AEs from pivotal phase 3 clinical trials of lenalidomide for the treatment of NDMM.

In RRMM, two randomized phases 3 trials reported grade 3–4 AEs, including neutropenia (35%), anemia (11%), thrombocytopenia (13%), and infections (16%), atrial fibrillation (3%), and VTE (13%) The duration of use of lenalidomide in second-line treatment did not generally worsen the safety profile [61, 62].

There are several phase 3 studies comparing triplets with an Rd backbone to an Rd doublet, including combinations with carfilzomib, ixazomib, daratumumab, or elotuzumab. Most of the additions of a third drug, in general, resulted in a higher incidence of AEs [63–66]. In contrast, in these phase 3 studies which included mild to moderate RI, the myelosuppressive effect of lenalidomide was more pronounced, a significantly higher incidence of thrombocytopenia (grade 3–4) was found in patients with CrCl < 50 ml/min compared to CrCl ≥ 50 ml/min (14% *vs.* 5%) with no difference in grade 3 or 4 neutropenia [67]. Table IV summarizes the incidence of serious AEs from pivotal phase 3 clinical trials of lenalidomide for the treatment of RRMM.

It is worth adding that the development of secondary neoplasms is observed in the treatment with lenalidomide in the context of recent melphalan therapy (e.g., MPR, or ASCT), post-ASCT, lenalidomide-maintenance therapy). In the treatment of NDMM, secondary primary malignancy were reported in 3–9% of NDMM and 4–17% of RRMM [61–66].

### *Management of AEs during treatment with lenalidomide*

The myelosuppressive effect of lenalidomide is the most serious AE. Blood counts (CBCs) need to be routinely monitored, minimum monthly, to avoid severe infections and discontinuation of lenalidomide treatment. You should follow the EMA product information for dose restrictions, resumptions, and dose reductions. When the platelets (PLT) count drops to <25 G/L, should discontinue lenalidomide treatment until the PLT count has improved to ≥50 G/L, and lenalidomide should be given at a reduced dose of 15 mg/day. With each successive decrease in the PLT count <25 G/L, lenalidomide treatment should be discontinued and restarted when the PLT count increases ≥50 G/L, at a dose reduced by 5 mg compared to the previously used dose [68]. When the ANC < 0.5 G/L, lenalidomide treatment should be discontinued, G-CSF administered, and lenalidomide at the current dose resumed when the ANC increases ≥1.0 G/L. If ANC count returns to <1.0 G/L, lenalidomide treatment should be discontinued and restarted at a dose 5 mg lower when the ANC becomes ≥1.0 G/L [68]. In the case of

**Table III.** Incidence of serious adverse events of lenalidomide in treatment of newly diagnosed multiple myeloma identified in pivotal phase 3 clinical trials

| Trial/author | MM-015 [60] | | | Rajkumar et al. [54] | | FIRST [57] | | SWOG S0777 [58] | | | MAIA [59] | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| regimen | MPR-R | MPR | MP | RD | Rd | Rd(cont) | Rd18 | MPT | Rd | VRd | Dara-Rd | Rd |
| hematological adverse events, grade ≥3 (%) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| neutropenia | 67 | 64 | 29 | 12 | 20 | 30 | 26 | 45 | 21 | 19 | 50 | 35 |
| thrombocytopenia | 35 | 38 | 12 | 6 | 5 | 9 | 8 | 11 | 14 | 18 | NA | NA |
| anemia | 24 | 26 | 14 | 8 | 7 | 19 | 16 | 19 | 16 | 13 | 12 | 20 |
| non-hematological adverse events, grade ≥3 (%) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| febrile neutropenia | 5 | 1 | 0 | NA | NA | 1 | 3 | 3 | NA | NA | NA | NA |
| infections | 9 | 13 | 7 | 16 | 9 | 32 | 22 | 17 | 14 | 19 | 32 | 23 |
| pneumonia | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| peripheral neuropathy | NA | NA | NA | 2 | 2 | 1 | <1 | 9 | 11 | 35 | NA | NA |
| venous thromboembolism | 1 | 4 | 1 | 26 | 12 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 9 | 8 | NA | NA |
| constipation | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | 2 | 2 | 5 | NA | NA | 2 | <1 |
| diarrhea | 2 | 1 | 0 | NA | NA | 5 | 3 | 1 | NA | NA | 7 | 4 |
| skin rash | 5 | 5 | 1 | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | 4 | 4 | NA | NA |
| secondary malignancy (any grade) | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | 7 | 7 | 9 | 3 | 3 | 9 | 7 |

Dara-Rd – daratumumab, lenalidomide, dexamethasone; MP – melphalan, prednisone; MPR – melphalan, prednisone, lenalidomide; MPR-R – melphalan, prednisone, lenalidomide and maintenance lenalidomide; NA – not available; Rd – lenalidomide, low dose dexamethasone; RD – lenalidomide, high dose dexamethasone; Rd18 – lenalidomide, dexamethasone (18 cycles); Rd(cont) – lenalidomide, dexamethasone continues therapy; VRd – bortezomib, lenalidomide, dexamethasone

**Table IV.** Incidence of serious adverse events of lenalidomide in treatment of relapsed/refractory multiple myeloma identified in pivotal phase 3 clinical trials

| Trial | ASPIRE [63] | | TOURMALINE-MM1 [64] | | POLLUX [65] | | ELOQUENT-2 [66] | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| regimen | Rd | KRd | Rd | Ixa-Rd | Rd | Dara-Rd | Rd | Elo-Rd |
| **hematological adverse events, grade ≥3 (%)** | | | | | | | | |
| neutropenia | 27 | 31 | 24 | 23 | 42 | 55 | 45 | 36 |
| thrombocytopenia | 13 | 17 | 9 | 19 | 16 | 15 | 21 | 21 |
| anemia | 17 | 19 | 13 | 9 | 21 | 18 | 21 | 20 |
| **non-hematological adverse events, grade ≥3 (%)** | | | | | | | | |
| febrile neutropenia | NA | NA | NA | NA | 3 | 6 | NA | NA |
| infections | | | | | | | | |
| pneumonia | 12 | 16. | NA | 2 | 10 | 15 | 26 | 33 |
| peripheral neuropathy | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | NA | NA | NA | NA |
| venous thromboembolism | NA | NA | 3 | 2 | NA | NA | NA | NA |
| constipation | <1 | <1 | <1 | <1 | <1 | 1 | <1 | 1 |
| diarrhea | 4 | 5 | NA | NA | 4 | 10 | 5 | 6 |
| skin rash | NA | NA | 2 | 5 | NA | NA | NA | NA |
| cardiac disorders | 2. | 4 | 2 | 3 | NA | NA | 8 | 5 |
| secondary malignancy (any grade) | NA | NA | 4 | 5 | 9 | 8 | 11 | 17 |

Dara-Rd – daratumumab, lenalidomide, dexamethasone; Elo-Rd – elotuzumab, lenalidomide, dexamethasone; Ixa-Rd – ixazomib, lenalidomide, dexamethasone; KRd – carfilzomib, lenalidomide, dexamethasone; NA – not available; Rd – lenalidomide, dexamethasone

anemia (hemoglobin [Hb] concentration <9.0 g/dl), treatment with erythropoiesis-stimulating agents (ESA) may be used.

Lenalidomide monotherapy has little effect on the development of VTE. This risk increases when lenalidomide is combined with high-dose dexamethasone and multi-drug combinations [54, 69]. VTE is more commonly found in the treatment of NDMM. Thromboprophylaxis is not recommended during treatment with lenalidomide monotherapy [46]. In other cases, the principles of thromboprophylaxis are the same as in therapy with thalidomide.

Other serious (grade 3–4) non-hematological AEs requiring a dose reduction of lenalidomide are infections (dose reduction 25–50%), asthenia (25–50%), grade 2 skin toxicity (50%), and grade 2 intestinal toxicity (50%). In the case of lenalidomide treatment with a high dose of dexamethasone, antibacterial prophylaxis is recommended in NDMM [67].

Skin rashes are observed in approximately 25% (grade 3–4: 3.5%) of patients, usually appearing in the first month of treatment and may last for several weeks [70]. Discontinuation of lenalidomide treatment and the use of antihistamines and systemic corticosteroids is recommended in the presence of grade 3–4 skin lesions. Retreatment once the rash has resolved is usually well tolerated [71]. The reappearance of skin lesions is a contraindication to further treatment with lenalidomide [72].

Constipation can be managed with a bowel regimen while continuing lenalidomide therapy. Diarrhea (defined as four or more bowel movements) is a common complication of lenalidomide treatment. Loperamide may be used to reduce the frequency of bowel movements [73, 74]. After several months of lenalidomide treatment, diarrhea may occur due to bile salt malabsorption syndrome [74].

### *Renal impairment*

Lenalidomide is mainly eliminated renally. When lenalidomide is used to treat patients with MM with RI, care should be taken in dose selection and monitoring renal function. In patients with moderate, severe, or end-stage renal disease, dose adjustments of lenalidomide are recommended at treatment initiation and during treatment. No dose adjustment of lenalidomide is required during therapy in patients with mild RI [68]. Lenalidomide dosing by CrCl is presented in table I.

## Pomalidomide

Pomalidomide is an IMiD currently used to treat RRMM. The safety profile of pomalidomide is similar to that of lenalidomide. Adverse events resulting from the myelosuppressive effect of pomalidomide dominate, mainly neutropenia, less often thrombocytopenia and anemia. Constipation, infection, fatigue, fever, peripheral edema, confusion, and VTE are the most

common non-hematological AEs. Peripheral neuropathy is uncommonly observed [75].

In the phase 3 clinical trial MM-003, patients were treated with Pd or with dexamethasone alone, neutropenia (grade 3–4) was reported in 48% of patients, most often developing in the first treatment cycles. Anemia (grade 3–4) was observed in 33% of patients and thrombocytopenia (grade 3–4) in 24% of patients. Febrile neutropenia was found in <10% of patients [76, 77]. In another phase, three studies in which Pd was combined with a third drug, i.e., bortezomib, daratumumab, isatuximab, elotuzumab, again predominantly hematological AEs were observed, including neutropenia in 41–85% of patients, thrombocytopenia 8–34% and anemia 10–35% of patients. Due to compulsory antithrombotic prophylaxis, VTE was observed in 2–4% of patients treated with Pd [78–81].

In the MM-002 study, although 73% of patients treated with Pd had a history of PN, no grade 3–4 PN was observed [82]. In study MM-003, 15% of Pd-treated patients had PN. Grade 1 PN was diagnosed in 52% of patients at baseline [76]. In the phase 3 study, OPTIMISMM, PN (grade 3–4) was reported in 8.5% of patients with RRMM treated with PVd and 4% of patients treated with bortezomib with dexamethasone (Vd) [78]. Table V summarizes the incidence of serious AEs from pivotal phase 3 clinical trials of pomalidomide for the treatment of RRMM.

### *Management of AEs during treatment with pomalidomide*

Due to the risk of myelosuppression, CBC monitoring weekly is recommended for the first two treatment cycles. When the ANC drops to <0.5 G/L, pomalidomide should be discontinued. G-CSF may be administered until the ANC is ≥1.0 G/L; after that, treatment should be resumed with pomalidomide at a dose reduced by 1 mg/day compared to the previously used dose [83, 84]. Due to the increased risk of infection during treatment with pomalidomide, some authors recommend antimicrobial prophylaxis for at least the first three treatment cycles. In patients at high risk of infection and/or after infection, prophylactic antibiotics may be considered. A reduction in the PLT count <25 G/L indicates discontinuing pomalidomide therapy until the PLT count is increased ≥50 G/L.

Treatment should be resumed at a dose reduced by 1 mg/day compared to previous treatment [83, 84]. The principles of treating anemia with pomalidomide are the same as those with lenalidomide treatment. Thrombotic prophylaxis is recommended in all patients treated with pomalidomide when combined with dexamethasone, following the same guidelines as for lenalidomide. If grade ≥2, PN develops, withhold pomalidomide treatment until symptoms improve to grades 0–1. After that, pomalidomide should be taken at a reduced

**Table V.** Incidence of serious adverse events of pomalidomide in treatment of relapsed/refractory multiple myeloma identified in pivotal phase 3 clinical trials

| Trial | MM-003 [76] | | STRATUS [77] | OPTIMISMM [78] | | APOLLO [79] | | ICARIA-MM [80] | | ELOQUENT-3 [81] | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| regimen | Dex | Pd | Pd | Vd | PVd | Pd | Dara-Pd | Pd | Ixa-Rd | Pd | Elo-Pd |
| **hematological adverse events, grade ≥3 (%)** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| neutropenia | 16 | 48 | 50 | 9 | 41 | 51 | 68 | 71 | 85 | 27 | 13 |
| thrombocytopenia | 26 | 21 | 24 | 29 | 28 | 18 | 17 | 25 | 34 | 5 | 8 |
| anemia | 37 | 33 | 33 | 14 | 14 | 21 | 17 | 29 | 35 | 21 | 20 |
| **non-hematological adverse events, grade ≥3 (%)** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| febrile neutropenia | 0 | 10 | NA | NA | NA | 3 | 9 | NA | NA | 20 | 10 |
| infections | 10 | 14 | 28 | 1 | 1 | 23 | 28 | <1 | 5 | 22 | 13 |
| pneumonia | | | 13 | 7 | 11 | 7 | 13 | 21 | 23 | 9 | 5 |
| peripheral neuropathy | NA | NA | <1 | 4 | 9 | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA |
| venous thromboembolism | NA | NA | <2 | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA |
| constipation | 0.0 | 2 | <1 | <1 | 3 | NA | NA | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| diarrhea | 1 | 1 | <1 | 4 | 7 | 1 | 5 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| skin rash | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | 2 | 0 |
| cardiac disorders | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | 4 | 7 |
| secondary malignancy (any grade) | NA | NA | 2 | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | 22 | 2 |

Dara-Pd – daratumumab, pomalidomide, dexamethasone; Dex – dexamethasone; Elo-Pd – elotuzumab, pomalidomide, dexamethasone; Ixa-Pd – isatuximab, pomalidomide, dexamethasone; NA – not available; Pd – pomalidomide, dexamethasone; PVd – pomalidomide, bortezomib, dexamethasone; Vd – bortezomib, dexamethasone

dose. The occurrence of PN (grade 4) is an indication for discontinuing treatment with pomalidomide [83, 84]. Treatment of the rash and reduction of the daily dose of lenalidomide by 1 mg is recommended. Rash (grade 4) is an indication of permanent discontinuation of pomalidomide treatment [84]. If constipation and another grade ≥3 non-hematological AEs occur, it is recommended that pomalidomide treatment be interrupted until symptoms resolve to grade ≤2 and that treatment is resumed at a dose reduced by one dose level for the next cycle [83].

### *Renal impairment*

Pomalidomide is metabolized in the liver and, unlike lenalidomide, only 2% of unmetabolized pomalidomide is excreted in the urine [47]. Based on study MM-013, patients with RRMM and moderate or severe RI, including those requiring hemodialysis, benefit from treatment with pomalidomide in combination with low-dose dexamethasone. The use of pomalidomide at a dose of 4 mg daily in combination with dexamethasone is an effective and safe treatment for patients with RRMM and moderate to severe RI, including patients who require hemodialysis [85]. Therefore, no dose reduction of pomalidomide is needed in patients with mild or moderate RI (CrCl ≥ 45 ml/min). Pomalidomide should be taken after hemodialysis on the patient's hemodialysis [47]. Pomalidomide dosing by CrCl is presented in table I.

## Conclusions

One of the most important drugs used in the treatment of MM is IMiDs. The combination of IMiD, dexamethasone, and a third drug (proteasome inhibitor, monoclonal antibody, alkylating drug) is the cornerstone of treatment for NDMM and RRMM.

Immunomodulatory drugs have a predictable toxicity profile. The most important AEs of thalidomide are PN and VTE, while lenalidomide and pomalidomide are predominantly myelosuppressive. Close monitoring of their safety profile makes it possible to protect patients from AEs by reducing doses and/or discontinuing treatment with IMiDs. Table V summarizes the most common AEs observed during treatment with IMiDs in patients with MM. Maintaining clinical vigilance and timely dose modifications to AEs with the simultaneous use of the recommended prophylaxis will reduce the development of serious AEs, resulting in improved quality of life and longer treatment duration.

**Conflict of interest:** none declared

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*Received: 19 Jan 2022*
*Accepted: 16 Mar 2022*

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