Flexible GnRH antagonist protocol vs. long GnRH agonist protocol in patients with polycystic ovary syndrome treated for IVF: comparison of clinical outcome and embryo quality

Protokół z antagonistą GnRH vs. długi protokół z agonistą GnRH u pacjentek z zespołem policystycznych jajników przygotowywanych do IVF: porównanie wyników klinicznych i jakości zarodków

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Abstract

Objectives: Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) is a common endocrine disorder, primarily affecting women of the reproductive age. The aim of the study was to assess the clinical efficacy and embryo quality in flexible gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH) antagonist protocol in comparison to the long GnRH agonist protocol in PCOS women undergoing in vitro fertilization (IVF).

Material and methods: This prospective, randomized study was conducted at the Department of Gynecology and Obstetrics, Clinical Center Niš, Serbia, between 2013 and 2014. The treatment included either a flexible GnRH antagonist protocol (n=45, antagonist group) or a long GnRH agonist protocol (n=45, agonist group).

Results: The length of the stimulation, total amount of gonadotropins used, as well as the average number of the aspirated and mature oocytes were higher in the agonists group. The endometrial thickness was also greater in the agonists group. A higher number of Class I and Class IV embryos were obtained after the agonist treatment and higher number of Class II and Class III embryos were obtained after the antagonist treatment. Pregnancy, implantation, and miscarriage rates were comparable between the groups.

Conclusions: The GnRH antagonist protocol in PCOS patients has a pregnancy rate comparable to that of the GnRH agonist protocol. Since this protocol has a lower rate of complications and is more convenient for patients, we believe that the GnRH antagonist protocol should be used as the first-line treatment for PCOS patients in an IVF program.

Key words: IVF / PCOS / GnRH agonist / GnRH antagonist /
**Streszczenie**

**Cel pracy:** Zespół polikystycznych jajników (PCOS) jest częstym zaburzeniem endokrynologicznym, głównie dotyczącym kobiet w wieku reprodukcyjnym. Celem badania była ocena skuteczności klinicznej oraz jakości zarodków uzyskanych w protokole flexible z antagonistą GnRH w porównaniu do protokułu długiego z agonistą GnRH u kobiet z zespołem PCO poddanych zapłodnieniu pozaestrojowemu (IVF).

**Materiał i metoda:** To prospectywne, randomizowane badanie przeprowadzono w Klinice Ginekologii i Położnictwa w Clinical Center Niš, w Serbii, w latach 2013 - 2014. Leczenie polegało na zastosowaniu protokołu flexible z antagonistą GnRH (n=45) lub długiego protokołu z agonistą GnRH (n=45).

** Wyniki:** Długość stymulacji, całkowita liczba użytych gonadotropin, jak również średnia liczba zaaspirowanych zarodków klasy I i IV uzyskano po podaniu agonisty nimetatisa a po leczeniu antagonistą uzyskano wyższą ilość zarodków klasy II i III. Liczba uzyskanych ciąży, implantacji i poronień była porównywalna w obu grupach.

**Wnioski:** Protokół z antagonistą GnRH u pacjentek z PCOS ma porównywalny odsetek ciąż jak protokół z agonistą GnRH. Ponieważ protokół z antagonistą GnRH ma mniejszą liczbę powikłań i jest wygodniejszy dla pacjentek, uważamy że powinien być stosowany jako leczenie pierwszego rzutu pacjentek z PCOS w programie zapłodnienia pozaestrojowego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** IVF / PCOS / agonista GnRH / antagonist GnRH /

**Introduction**

Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), which was first recognized in 1935, is a common endocrine disorder, primarily affecting women of the reproductive age. It is characterized by irregularity of the menstrual cycles, presence of polycystic ovaries detected by ultrasound, and hyperandrogenism (clinical or biochemical) [1, 2]. This syndrome can be diagnosed based on several different criteria. The Rotterdam criteria, which define PCOS by the presence of at least two out of three criteria: oligo-anovulation, clinical and/or biochemical hyperandrogenism, and polycystic ovaries (≥12 follicles measuring 2–9 mm in diameter, or ovarian volume >10 ml in at least one ovary), are the most widely accepted. According to these criteria, the prevalence of PCOS is 15% [3]. Chronic anovulation is the main problem of PCOS patients. Low progesterone levels, caused by missing selection of the dominant follicle and ovulation, lead to increased pulsatility of the gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH) and, consequently, to elevated serum concentrations of the luteinizing hormone (LH) [4]. The increased concentration of LH can activate a premature meiotic cleavage, damage the oocyte nucleus, and lead to apoptosis [5]. It is also associated with higher miscarriage rate [6].

The optimal infertility treatment for PCOS patients is still a matter of debate, but in patients who are refractory to conventional modalities, in vitro fertilization (IVF) is a reasonable option. Patients with PCOS can undergo different IVF protocols. So far, no protocol has been chosen as the most effective in these patients [3].

The ability of GnRH agonists to suppress LH before and during controlled ovarian hyperstimulation (COH) has made the long GnRH protocol a reasonable option for women with PCOS [7]. On the other hand, GnRH antagonists have no flare-up effect and decrease the incidence of the ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome (OHSS), which is a serious iatrogenic complication during COH in PCOS patients [7, 8]. Furthermore, the GnRH antagonists protocol is shorter, less expensive, and more patient-friendly [9,10].

According to the consensus on infertility treatment related to PCOS, the optimal stimulation protocol is still under debate. For this reason, the ESHRE/ASRM consensus document has recently stressed the need to perform further randomized controlled trials, comparing follicle stimulating hormones (FSH) stimulation protocol with the use of GnRH agonist versus GnRH antagonist [3].

**Objectives**

The aim of the study was to assess the clinical efficacy and the quality of embryos in flexible GnRH antagonist protocol in comparison to the long GnRH agonist protocol in PCOS women undergoing IVF.

**Material and methods**

This prospective, randomized, single-center study was conducted at the Department of Gynecology and Obstetrics, Clinical Center Niš, Serbia, in 2013 and 2014. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of the two groups in a 1:1 ratio, according to a computer-generated randomization list. The treatment included either a long GnRH agonist (n=45, agonist group) or a flexible GnRH antagonist (n=45, antagonist group) protocol. Neither the patients nor the doctors were blinded to the treatment assignment. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Local Ethics Committee approved of the study.

Each patient could participate in the study only once. The inclusion criteria were as follows: previously diagnosed PCOS (the Rotterdam criteria), age 18-39 years, body mass index (BMI) of 18-30 kg/m². The exclusion criteria were: abnormalities of the uterine cavity, dysfunction of the thyroid or abnormal prolactin levels, ovarian cysts, as well as severe disturbances of spermatogenesis in the partner, requiring the ICSI method.

During the period of 21 days, all patients received an oral contraceptive pill (OCP) daily, starting on Day 2 of spontaneous menses of the cycle prior to the treatment cycle.
In the antagonist group, on Day 2 of the cycle following dis-
continuation of OCP, we started a recombinant FSH (Gonal F,
Mec Serono, Switzerland). Based on the ovarian response, as-
scribed by transvaginal ultrasound examinations and by meas-
uring serum estradiol levels, the starting dose of 150 IU/day was
individually adjusted. After 5 days of COH, the first control ultra-
sound examination was performed and estradiol concentration was
measured. The moment the lead follicle reached the size of 14 mm
in diameter and/or estradiol levels reached the value of ≥300 pg/
ml in the flexible GnRH antagonist protocol inj. cetrotrelax 0.25 mg
(Cetrotide; Mec Serono, Switzerland) was administered. Treat-
ment with rFSH and GnRH antagonist was continued on a daily
basis until and including the day of final oocyte maturation trigger.

In the agonist group, starting from Day 21 of the menstrual
cycle, we began the treatment consisting of GnRH agonist 0.1 mg
tripotretin (Dipheritene, Ipsen Pharma Biotech, France), admin-
istered subcutaneously once a day. After pituitary desensitization
had been confirmed (defined as serum estradiol levels of <20 pg/
ml, serum LH of <2.0 mIU/ml), we started the administration of recombinant FSH. After 5 days of stimulation and based on the
ovarian response, as assessed by transvaginal ultrasonography and
serum estradiol levels, the initial dose of 150 IU/day was adjusted.

In both protocols, a dose of 10,000 IU of human chorionic
gonadotropin (hCG) (Pregnul, Organon, Holland) was used for
final oocyte maturation. The patients received the dose either when
a mean diameter of three follicles reached the size of ≥17 mm or
when the dominant follicle reached the size of ≥18 mm, with the
following two ≥16 mm. Next, 34-36h after the hCG injection, we
performed transvaginal ultrasound-guided oocyte retrieval. The
oocytes which reached metaphase II at retrieval were classified as
mature (M2), while those in metaphase I (M1) or germinal vesicle
stage (GV) were considered as immature. 38-40h after
hCG injection, insemination was performed by the conventional
IVF method. The appearance of two pronuclei (PN) 16-18h after
insemination confirmed normal fertilization. The fertilization rate
was expressed as the number of zygotes with two pronuclei over the
total number of inseminated oocytes.

The assessment of the embryo scoring was made in accor-
dance with the internal laboratory embryo score standards. Embryo
quality was evaluated on the basis of morphological features and
dynamics of embryo development. Embryonic morphological fea-
tures are related to the blastomeres of equal or unequal size and
present or absent fragmentation of cytoplasm. The assessment
of the embryo development dynamics requires monitoring of the
number of blastomeres every 24 hours until the day of ET, and
the comparison of the actual number of blastomeres with their
expected number. The embryo assessment system was created
according to these two parameters and the embryos were classi-
ﬁed into four groups. Class I embryos on Day 3 or 68±1 h after
insemination, fulﬁll all three of the following criteria:
1) embryos have 6 to 8 blastomeres,
2) all blastomeres are equal,
3) there is no fragmentation in blastomeres.

Class II embryos do not meet one of the abovementioned three
criteria – they have less than 6 blastomeres or have 6-8 blastomeres
but unequal, or fragmentation is present. Class III embryos do not
fulﬁll two criteria, whereas embryos in class IV do not meet any of
the above stated criteria.

Embryos were transferred on Day 3. All patients received 600
mg of micronized progesterone per day (Utrogestan, Laboratories
Besins-International S.A., France) for luteal phase support. For
the assessment of pregnancy serum hCG assay was used 12 days
from embryo transfer. Clinical pregnancy was confirmed by fetal
cardiac activity visualized by transvaginal ultrasound at 6-7 weeks of
gestation.

A modiﬁed classiﬁcation system, based on several combined
criteria reported by Golan et al., was used to establish the grades
of OHSS severity [11]. Grade I included patients with abdominal
distension and discomfort, which were recognized as symptoms
of mild OHSS. Furthermore, the symptoms included nausea,
vomiting, and diarrhea. In addition, ultrasound examination of
the ovaries (5-12 cm) was also included in mild OHSS. Grade II,
or moderate OHSS, included features of grade I, i.e. mild OHSS
combined with the ultrasound evidence of ascites. Grade III, or
severe OHSS, included patients who required hospitalization be-
cause they developed severe and critical OHSS, or because their
medical condition fulfilled one or more of the hospital admission
criteria. The admission criteria for hospitalization were estab-
lished according to the presence of one of the following: ascites,
hydrothorax, hemocrit ≥45%, oliguria, elevated liver enzymes,
dyspnea, anasarca, or acute renal failure.

The research results are systematized and analyzed using
descriptive statistical and quantitative analysis software package
SPSS [Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 14.0 for
Windows 2003]. The comparison of the arithmetic means of the
two samples was performed using t-test for independent samples
or Mann Whitney test, depending on data distribution. The com-
parison of the frequency of attributable features was performed by
χ²-test or Fisher’s test. The p-value of <0.05 was considered as
statistically significant.

Results

The study included 90 women: 45 received the long GnRH
agonist protocol treatment (50.00%) and 45 received the GnRH
antagonist protocol treatment (50.00%). No statistically signiﬁcant
differences in age and BMI between the agonists and antagonists
group were found (Table I).

Concentrations of FSH, LH, and AMH as well as the LH/
FSH ratio did not differ signiﬁcantly with regard to the stimula-
tion protocol (Table II).

The length of the stimulation was signiﬁcantly higher in the
agonist group as compared to the antagonist group (p<0.001).
The total amount of gonadotropins used for the stimulation was
higher in the agonist group, but there was no statistically signiﬁ-
cant difference (p=0.282). The average number of the follicles
≥16 mm was statistically signiﬁcantly higher in the agonist group
(p<0.001). The average number of the aspirated oocytes was also
statistically signiﬁcantly higher in the agonist group (p=0.005).
The number of mature oocytes was statistically signiﬁcantly higher
in the agonist group (p=0.035) (Table III). The number of im-
mature oocytes was higher in the agonist group, but there was no
statistically signiﬁcant difference (p=0.051). The endometrial
thickness on the day of HCG administration was statistically sig-
niﬁcantly greater in the group of agonists as compared to the group
of antagonists (p=0.021).

The total number of the obtained embryos in the agonists
and in the antagonists was 347 and 285, respectively. A statisti-
cally signiﬁcantly higher number of Class I and Class IV embryos
Table I. Baseline characteristics of PCOS patients.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Agonist group n=45</th>
<th>Antagonist group n=45</th>
<th>p†</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age, years</td>
<td>31.20±3.98</td>
<td>31.36±4.02</td>
<td>0.854</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI (kg/m²)</td>
<td>23.16±3.03</td>
<td>23.22±3.16</td>
<td>0.919</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† Mann-Whitney test

Table II. Basal hormone levels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Agonist group n=45</th>
<th>Antagonist group n=45</th>
<th>p†</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FSH (IU/L)</td>
<td>5.40±1.74</td>
<td>5.53±1.85</td>
<td>0.366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LH (IU/L)</td>
<td>7.44±3.28</td>
<td>6.84±1.96</td>
<td>0.504</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMH (ng/ml)</td>
<td>7.13±3.57</td>
<td>6.73±2.88</td>
<td>0.810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LH/FSH</td>
<td>1.52±0.80</td>
<td>1.24±0.33</td>
<td>0.197</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† Mann-Whitney test

was obtained after the agonist treatment (p=0.006, respectively p=0.046). A statistically significantly higher number of Class II and Class III embryos was obtained after the antagonist treatment (p=0.008, respectively p=0.036) (Table IV).

The total number of the transferred embryos in the agonists was 115 and in the antagonists 115. A statistically significantly higher number of Class IV embryos were transferred in the group of agonists (p=0.003) (Table V).

The number of pregnancies, multiple pregnancies, miscarriages, the implantation rate, and OHSS are not significantly different as compared to the stimulation protocol (Table VI).

Discussion

Over the last two decades, the GnRH agonist protocol has been used as the first-choice treatment in COH for PCOS patients. Dealing with IVF patients, we also tried to take into consideration the psychological aspect of the treatment. We noticed that treatment duration in the GnRH agonist protocol and, primarily, the obligation to receive therapy every day at the same time over a long period of time, are considered very frustrating by most patients. On the other hand, although the GnRH antagonist protocol is more convenient for patients, it is still used in most centers as the second-line protocol. Our study has shown that this protocol is not only more patient-friendly but also much safer for patients with the same clinical pregnancy rate (CPR) as those in the long GnRH agonist protocol.

By including only patients with BMI <30, we excluded the possibility of the negative effect of high BMI on LH surge. LH is known to play an important role during COH. However, the issue of optimal LH concentration necessary for the most favorable COH is still under debate, and remains a subject of different studies [12]. A study by Lainas et al., showed significantly lower basal LH levels among antagonist group women [13]. However, that study did not examine the relation between the LH level and the IVF outcome. Kurzawa et al., demonstrated significantly higher LH levels at the beginning and during COH, as well as on the day of hCG administration in the antagonist group, but found no correlation between serum LH concentration and the IVF outcome [14]. In our study, there were no statistically significant differences in basal serum LH concentration between the agonist and the antagonist group.

Our results have shown that a shorter duration of gonadotropin stimulation and a lower total amount of rFSH are required in the antagonist group. These results are similar to those published by other studies (Bahceci et al., 2005; Ragni et al., 2005; Griesinger et al., 2006; Lainas et al., 2007). We are of the opinion that after the desensitization period in the long protocol, there is a great decrease in serum LH level, which correlates to a lower FSH sensitivity and, consequently, leads to longer stimulation and requires a higher amount of gonadotropin.

A meta-analysis by Griesinger et al., showed no significant differences between the obtained oocytes from GnRH agonist and GnRH antagonist group in patients with PCOS [10]. Although, according to many studies, oocytes retrieved from patients with PCOS are immature and of poorer quality with a lower fertilization capacity, a study by Kurzawa showed no differences between the two groups regarding fertilization capacity [15, 16, 17]. In our study, the total number of the aspirated oocytes was higher in the agonist group, with a statistical difference regarding mature and no statistical difference regarding immature oocytes. Endometrial thickness on the hCG day was statistically smaller in the group of antagonists as compared to the agonist group. Our results are similar to the results of Huang SY et al., whose study included unselected patients undergoing IVF and embryo transfer [18]. We have not been able to prove that the reduced endometrial thickness has any impact on the CPR. The fertilization rate showed no differences between the groups.

The total number of the obtained embryos was higher in the agonist group. However, those patients had more class I and class IV embryos, whereas the antagonist group had more class II and class III embryos. Since the usual policy of the clinic is to transfer two (and never more than three) embryos, there were no differences between the number of the transferred embryos. We know that class IV embryos are of poor quality and, as such, are not suitable for embryo transfer, especially for single transfer. In our study, 9 of these embryos were used for embryo transfer in the agonist group, exclusively as the third embryo together with the two other class I and class II embryos. In our opinion, they could not have influenced the CPR. To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to examine embryo quality differences between the agonist and the antagonist groups. We hypothesize that since PCOS patients receive more oocytes during COH and, consequently, more embryos, the selection of the best-quality embryo for transfer can overcome the lack of quality in all embryos. More studies concerning this theory are needed.

Literature reports on the IVF outcome in these two protocols remain confusing. A meta-analysis by Kolibianakis et al., showed that the probability of a live birth does not differ between the GnRH agonist and antagonist protocol [19]. On the other hand, a meta-analysis by Al-Imany et al., revealed that GnRH antagonist gives significantly worse results than agonist in the general IVF population [20]. A meta-analysis by Griesinger et al., showed similar benefits of GnRH analogs regarding PCOS population [10]. The implantation rate as well as the pregnancy rate in our study revealed no differences between the two groups. The number of multiple pregnancies as well as OHSS was higher in the GnRH agonist group. The reason for the higher incidence of OHSS in
Table III. Ovarian stimulation characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Agonist group n=45</th>
<th>Antagonist group n=45</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Length of stimulation (days)</td>
<td>10.91±2.09</td>
<td>9.44±2.40</td>
<td>&lt;0.001†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total amount of gonadotropins used (IU)</td>
<td>1804.51±710.24</td>
<td>1580.53±415.86</td>
<td>0.282†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of follicles ≥16mm</td>
<td>14.16±6.53</td>
<td>9.24±4.83</td>
<td>&lt;0.001‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of retrieved oocytes</td>
<td>13.71±6.69</td>
<td>10.11±6.46</td>
<td>0.005‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of mature oocytes</td>
<td>9.80±6.08</td>
<td>7.29±4.95</td>
<td>0.035‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of mature/aspirated oocytes (%)</td>
<td>71.01%</td>
<td>72.08%</td>
<td>0.700‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of immature oocytes</td>
<td>4.00±2.82</td>
<td>2.82±2.27</td>
<td>0.051†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of immature/aspirated oocytes (%)</td>
<td>28.98%</td>
<td>27.91%</td>
<td>0.700‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endometrial thickness on the day of HCG administration (mm)</td>
<td>10.38±1.54</td>
<td>9.71±1.12</td>
<td>0.021#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of fertilization</td>
<td>67.85%</td>
<td>68.13%</td>
<td>0.849‡</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† Mann-Whitney test, ‡ Chi-square test, # t test,

Table IV. Characteristics of embryos on Day 3 in protocols (N, %).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Stimulation protocol</th>
<th>p†</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agonist group</td>
<td>Antagonist group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of the obtained embryos</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class I</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class II</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class III</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class IV</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† Chi-square test

Table V. Characteristics of transferred embryos (N, %).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>The stimulation protocol</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agonist group</td>
<td>Antagonist group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of transferred embryos</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class I</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class II</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class III</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class IV</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of transferred embryos</td>
<td>2.56±0.92</td>
<td>2.56±0.87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† Chi-square test, † Fisher’s test, # Mann-Whitney test

Table VI. Comparison of the clinical efficacy of antagonist and agonist protocols.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Agonist group n=45</th>
<th>Antagonist group n=45</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Implantation rate</td>
<td>24.35%</td>
<td>20.87%</td>
<td>0.636‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of clinical pregnancies</td>
<td>20 (44.40%)</td>
<td>21 (46.70%)</td>
<td>0.832†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of biochemical pregnancies</td>
<td>2 (4.40%)</td>
<td>1 (2.20%)</td>
<td>0.557†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of multiple pregnancies</td>
<td>7 (15.56%)</td>
<td>2 (4.44%)</td>
<td>0.156‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twins</td>
<td>6 (13.33%)</td>
<td>1 (2.22%)</td>
<td>0.115‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triples</td>
<td>1 (2.22%)</td>
<td>1 (2.22%)</td>
<td>1.000‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cancelled cycles/embryo transfer</td>
<td>3 (6.67%)</td>
<td>3 (6.67%)</td>
<td>1.000‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OHSS total number</td>
<td>7 (15.56%)</td>
<td>3 (6.70%)</td>
<td>0.314‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OHSS Grade I</td>
<td>5 (11.10%)</td>
<td>3 (6.70%)</td>
<td>0.241‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OHSS Grade II</td>
<td>2 (4.40%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.494‡</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† Chi-square test, † Fisher’s test
the agonist group is related to a greater number of follicles and oocytes, and additionally, to a greater number of small follicles, which leads to high estradiol levels [21]. Kaur et al., stated that for every 25 women undergoing downregulation by an agonist, we should expect one extra case of severe OHSS [22]. In our study, we were seven patients with OHSS in the agonist group and three patients in the antagonist group. There were only two patients with moderate OHSS in the agonist group, and no such patients in the antagonist group. A small sample size may explain the lack of statistically significant differences. However, we believe that three times higher number of multiple pregnancies and over twice as many cases of OHSS in the agonist group, as compared to the antagonist group, cannot exclude a clinically significant difference.

Bearing in mind the risk of developing OHSS, preventive measures should be undertaken before, during, and after stimulation. The strategy for the prevention and management of OHSS among PCOS patients can be divided into three levels. The primary preventive measures, which have been used in our study, include the choice of the starting dose of gonadotropins, which does not exceed 150 IU/day. Furthermore, a primary strategy is to decrease the dose of gonadotropins during stimulation – a step-down protocol [23]. Close ultrasound and estradiol level monitoring is also effective in reducing the incidence of OHSS, with a sensitivity and specificity of about 80% [24]. Secondary prevention measures, which were not used in our study, include coasting, administration of GnRH antagonists in GnRH agonists cycles, and administration of a GnRH agonist instead of hCG in GnRH antagonist cycles as a trigger for final oocyte maturation [25, 26]. Coasting is withholding of gonadotropin use until safe levels of estradiol are obtained. A recent meta-analysis has not confirmed this approach to OHSS prevention [27]. The third level of prevention of OHSS includes the use of albumin, dopamine agonist, and vitrification of embryos, or cycle cancellation. We applied only albumin in our study. The Cochrane review showed only limited evidence of benefit from intra-venous albumin administration at the time of oocyte retrieval in prevention or reduction of the incidence of severe OHSS in high-risk women undergoing IVF [28].

Conclusions
Since GnRH antagonist protocol has a pregnancy rate comparable to that of the GnRH agonist protocol and, is correlated with a lower rate of complications such as multiple pregnancies and OHSS, and since it is more convenient for the patients, we believe that the mild stimulation ovarian protocol should be used as the first-line treatment for PCOS patients in the IVF program.

Authors’ contribution:
1. Milan S. Trenkić – concept and design of study, analysis and interpretation of data, article draft, acquisition of data, corresponding author.
2. Jasmina Popović – acquisition of data, concept and design of study.
3. Vesna Kopljević – revising the manuscript critically.
4. Antur Bjelic – analysis and interpretation of data, revising the manuscript critically.
5. Radomir Živadinović – acquisition of data, analysis and interpretation of data.

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the manuscript has not been published in or submitted to any other journal.

Source of financing:
The authors certify that have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest, and have non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in the manuscript.

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