Effect of Timing of Pharmaconutrition (Immunonutrition) Administration on Outcomes of Elective Surgery for Gastrointestinal Malignancies: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis

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JPEN J Parenter Enteral Nutr 2014 38: 53 originally published online 14 February 2013
DOI: 10.1177/0148607112474825

Review

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American Society for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition

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Journal of Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition
Volume 38 Number 1
January 2014 53–69

DOI: 10.1177/0148607112474825
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Abstract

Background: Pharmaconutrition has previously been reported in elective surgery to reduce postoperative infective complications and duration of hospital length of stay. *Objective*: To update previously published meta-analyses and elucidate potential benefits of providing arginine-dominant pharmaconutrition in surgical patients specifically with regard to the timing of administration of pharmaconutrition. *Design*: Randomized controlled trials comparing the use of pharmaconutrition with standard nutrition in elective adult surgical patients between 1980 and 2011 were identified. The meta-analysis was prepared in accordance with Preferred Reporting of Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) recommendations. *Results*: Twenty studies yielding 21 sets of data met inclusion criteria. A total of 2005 patients were represented (pharmaconutrition, n = 1010; control, n = 995), in whom pharmaconutrition was provided preoperatively (k = 5), perioperatively (k = 2), or postoperatively (k = 14). No differences were seen in postoperative mortality with the provision of pharmaconutrition irrespective of timing of administration. Statistically significant reductions in infectious complications and length of stay were found with perioperative and postoperative administration. Perioperative administration was also associated with a statistically significant reduction in anastomotic dehiscence, whereas a reduction in noninfective complications was demonstrated with postoperative administration. Preoperative pharmaconutrition demonstrated no notable advantage over standard nutrition provision in any of the clinical outcomes assessed. *Conclusions*: This meta-analysis highlights the importance of timing as a clinical consideration in the provision of pharmaconutrition in elective gastrointestinal surgical patients and identifies areas where further research is required. (*JPEN J Parenter Enteral Nutr*. 2014;38:53-69)

Keywords

immunonutrition; pharmaconutrition; gastrointestinal surgery; elective surgery; cancer; complications; meta-analysis; human

Clinical Relevancy Statement

In an elective surgical population, the provision of pharmaconutrition containing supraphysiological doses of arginine, with or without glutamine, ω-3 fatty acids, and nucleotides, has been theorized to modulate the immune and metabolic responses. Therefore, pharmaconutrition may improve clinical outcomes such as postoperative infective complications and length of hospital stay (LOS) without adversely affecting mortality. However, the results of a number of randomized controlled trials have been conflicting. This meta-analysis appears to confirm the commonly accepted benefits of arginine-dominant pharmaconutrition in relation to reductions in postoperative infective complications and LOS. Nonetheless, these benefits were only seen in peri- and postoperative pharmaconutrition administration in the current work. It is therefore evident that the timing of pharmaconutrition provision is of utmost importance, and this information is necessary to guide clinical practice and institutional policy. The current work differs from previous meta-analyses through the emphasis on timing of pharmaconutrition provision, use of stricter inclusion criteria to reduce heterogeneity in the results obtained, and by including the latest available publications.

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Financial disclosure: None declared.

Received for publication September 22, 2012; accepted for publication December 11, 2012.

This article originally appeared online on February 14, 2013.

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Introduction

Nutrition provision is recognized to be an important aspect in the perioperative management of elective gastrointestinal (GI) surgery patients, and the timely provision of nutrition has been associated with improved postoperative outcomes.[1,2] The benefits of nutrition provision in surgical patients are traditionally thought to arise from the provision of macronutrients such as calories for energy and protein for wound healing, as well as to reduce the impact of catabolism in the postoperative period. However, it has been theorized that due to the complex inflammatory, immune, and oxidative stress that is experienced postoperatively, providing specific nutrients in supraphysiological doses may provide vital substrates that serve to modulate these immune and metabolic responses and thus improve clinical outcomes.[3] In view of this, during the early 1990s, new nutrition support formulas emerged containing higher quantities of arginine, with or without glutamine, ω-3 fatty acids, and nucleotides.[3] These products have been commonly referred to as *immunonutrition, immune-enhancing diets*, and, more recently, *pharmaconutrition*, in recognition of their intended pharmaceutical-like action rather than purely as nutrient provision.[3]

In an elective surgical population, the use of pharmaconutrition has been reported to reduce postoperative infective complications and length of stay (LOS), without adversely affecting mortality described in medical and trauma subgroups of a critically ill population.[4-10] The results of individual studies have been conflicting,[11-15] but the use of these products has gained increasing acceptance following their incorporation into practice guidelines.[16,17] Seven meta-analyses on this topic have been conducted on surgical patients[18-21] or with surgical patients as a subgroup analysis of a critical care population,[22-24] but there are limitations to applying the outcomes of these meta-analyses to practice due to the inclusion of studies using nonequivalent control groups, inclusion of diverse surgical populations, and the failure to account for practical differences between the studies (ie, administration protocols of pharmaconutrition).

The objective of the current work is to further explore the literature describing the postoperative outcomes from randomized controlled trials (RCTs) comparing the timing of provision of arginine-dominant pharmaconutrition formulations with standard products in an elective GI surgery population. The timing of pharmaconutrition provision is considered of the utmost importance as this information is necessary to guide clinical practice and institutional policy. The current work differs from previous meta-analyses through the emphasis on timing of pharmaconutrition provision, use of stricter inclusion criteria to reduce heterogeneity in the results obtained, and by including the latest available publications.

Materials and Methods

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies comparing the provision of arginine-dominant (>9 g arginine/L) pharmaconutrition formulations with or without other immune-modulating nutrients with those of standard nutrition composition were reviewed. Only RCTs with primary comparisons between the different nutrition formulations were considered for inclusion. For inclusion, studies also must have been conducted in adult (>18 years) elective GI surgical patients and have reported on clinically relevant outcomes pertaining to the postoperative period. Outcomes assessed were those considered to exert influence over practical aspects of surgical practice and institutional policy decisions. All studies reporting on outcomes of this nature were considered, and final analyses were run on outcome variables where numbers were sufficient to allow statistical analysis.

Additional exclusion criteria included studies that investigated the effect of parenteral provision supplemented with pharmaconutrients and duplicate publications.

Search Strategies and Data Collection

Electronic databases (Medline, PubMed, EMBASE, CINAHL, Cochrane Register of Systematic Reviews, Science Citation Index) were cross-searched for RCTs published between 1980 and 2011, using search terms customized to each search engine in an attempt to detect published papers meeting the inclusion criteria. Limits were set to RCTs and adult patients to reflect the inclusion criteria. Search strategies used included (IMMUNONUTRITON and SURGERY), (IMMUN* and NUTRITION), (PHARMACONUTRITION), and (ARGININE or OMEGA-3 or RNA or NUCLEOTIDE and SURGERY). Reference lists of reviews and existing meta-analyses were hand searched for further appropriate citations. Companies that produce pharmaconutrition products and experts in the field were contacted for information about unpublished studies. Where necessary, authors were contacted by e-mail (and follow-up letter by post when a response to a second e-mail was not received) for clarification or additional information.

The data were prepared in accordance with the Preferred Reporting of Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement.[25] Data extraction and critical appraisal of identified studies were carried out by 2 authors (E.O. and M.A.M.) for compliance with inclusion criteria. The authors were not blinded to the source of the document or authorship for the purpose of data extraction. The data were compared and discrepancies were addressed with discussion until consensus was achieved.

Evaluation of the methodological quality of identified studies was conducted using the Jadad scoring system, which provides a numerical quality score based on the reporting of randomization, blinding, and reporting of withdrawals.[26]

Statistical Analysis

Meta-analyses were performed using odds ratios (ORs) for binary outcomes and weighted mean differences (WMDs) for continuous outcome measures. A slightly amended estimator of OR was used to avoid the computation of a reciprocal of

zeros among observed values in the calculation of the original OR.[27] Random-effects models, developed by using the inverse variance-weighted method approach,[28] were used to combine the data. Heterogeneity among the study measures was assessed using the Q statistic[28-30] and I^2 index.[31,32]

Sensitivity analyses were conducted by removing studies that used experimental formulations with considerable differences in their product formulation to assess their influence on the results obtained.

Funnel plots were synthesized to determine the presence of publication bias in the meta-analysis. Standard error was plotted against the treatment effects (log OR for the dichotomous and WMD for continuous variables, respectively)[28,33,34] to allow 95% confidence interval (CI) limits to be displayed. All estimates were obtained using computer programs written in R.[35] All plots were obtained using the "rmeta" package.[36]

A significance level of 5% ($\alpha = 0.05$) was applied to tests of hypotheses.

Results

Included Studies

Cross-searching of electronic databases yielded a total of 211 abstracts and hand searches of reference lists provided a further 16 citations. After exclusion of 136 duplicate citations, 91 unique citations of potential relevance were retrieved for review. The process by which these were excluded from inclusion is described in Figure 1. Two potentially relevant studies[37,38] were unable to be assessed due to lack of access to the non–English-language journals in which they were published. Although a further potentially relevant unpublished study ("Sydney") was identified through a citation search of a previously published meta-analysis,[18] attempts to contact authors and the company manufacturing the product did not yield any additional information; therefore, the study could not be assessed for inclusion. Correspondence with the companies producing commercially available pharmaconutrition products did not yield additional unpublished studies, but the plans for an upcoming RCT were obtained through correspondence with an author of the Waitzberg et al[18] meta-analysis.

The 20 studies that met the inclusion criteria are described in Tables 1–4; however, due to multiple arms of single studies independently meeting the inclusion criteria in 1 study,[12] 21 individual sets of data were analyzed. For eligible studies that incorporated multiple intervention arms in their study design, only those that used the enteral route were included in the analysis. Pooled results yielded 2005 patients (pharmaconutrition, n = 1010; control, n = 995) from studies published between 1988 and 2011. Studies were categorized according to the timing of pharmaconutrition provision: 4 studies, yielding 5 sets of data, provided preoperative interventions (pharmaconutrition provided 5–7 days preoperatively as an oral supplement); 14 studies described postoperative interventions (pharmaconutrition product commenced via jejunal feeding tube on postoperative day [POD] 1 or 2, used to meet a defined nutrition goal until POD7 or when oral intake was established); and 2 studies provided perioperative interventions (providing both pre- and postoperative provision of pharmaconutrition as described above).

The included studies collectively demonstrate moderate methodological quality according to the Jadad score, with an average score of 3.1 (out of 5), with a range of 1–5. Fourteen studies reported on withdrawals,[4,5,9,11-15,39-44] 13 described an appropriate method of randomization,* and 8 studies reported using blinding.[5,9,12,39,42,44,45,47] One study was not included in the 8 that reported using a blinded method because although it states it was a double-blind methodology in the title, this was not referred to throughout the article.[40] Jadad scores are reported in Tables 2 to 4.

All but 17 patients (14 from Jiang et al,[43] 2 from Sodergren,[45] and 1 from Daly et al[47] representing <1% of the total patients analyzed) received elective surgery for the curative management of GI malignancies (see Table 4). Twelve studies reported on the rates of malnutrition within their study population[4-7,9,12-15,40,41,47]: rates varied greatly, ranging from 9%–100% with an average of about 40%. Malnutrition was defined as ≥10% body weight loss in most studies.

The nutrition composition products used in the included studies are summarized in Tables 5 and 6. All but 3 studies used commercially available pharmaconutrition products of similar composition (ie, arginine 9–12g/L, with ω-3 fatty acids and nucleotides): Impact or Oral Impact account for 65% of the studied products. The experimental products used by McCarter et al[12] and Daly et al[47] were of significantly different composition (higher arginine [26 g/L] content, with or without glutamine or ω-3 fatty acids). The Sodergren et al[45] study product was reported to be a prototype of Intestamin that contains arginine, glutamine, ω-3 fatty acids, and micronutrients, but the exact composition of the product could not be ascertained due to it being subject to "commercial in confidence" conditions (Deborah Willshire, Fresenius Kabi, written communication, July 7, 2011). The authors' (E.O. and M.A.M.) interpretation of the nature of the feeding regimen for the prototype product suggests a composition more similar to the existing pharmaconutrition products used in a surgical population than to the commercially available Intestamin product,[48] and it was therefore included in the meta-analysis but omitted for sensitivity analyses.

Thirteen of the 20 studies included stated they received support from the companies that produce the products being studied.† Support was most commonly received through the provision of pharmaconutrition products and occasionally though direct financial support. Other studies are unclear about the nature of company involvement,[14,15,43,46,49] and only 2 studies deny any conflict of interest or financial support.[13,40]

*References 4-7, 9, 13, 14, 39-42, 45, 46.
†References 4-7, 9, 11, 12, 39, 41, 42, 44, 45, 47.

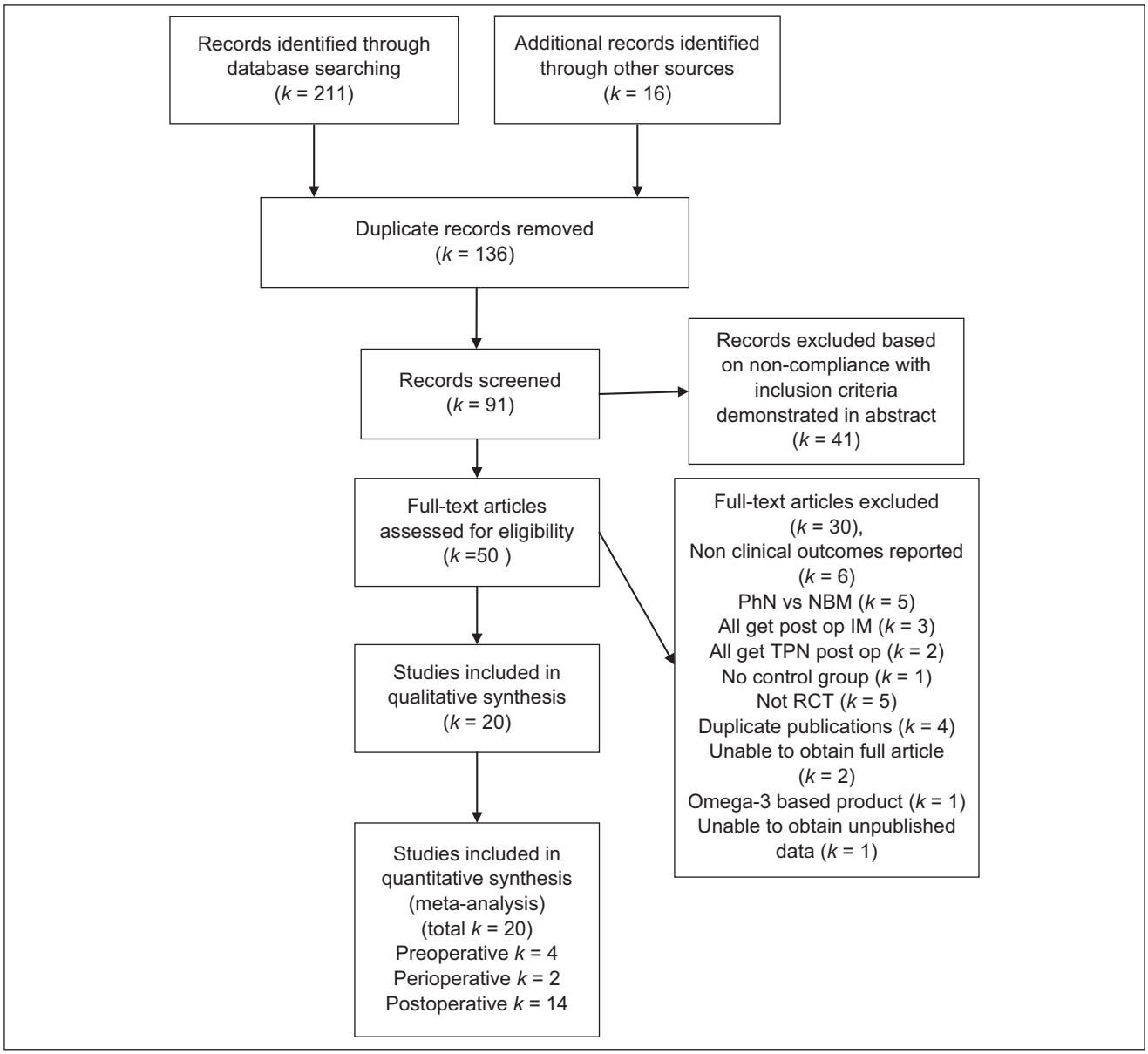

Figure 1. Preferred Reporting of Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement describing the identification, inclusion, and exclusion of randomized controlled trials evaluating the effect of pharmaconutrition on postoperative clinical outcomes compared with standard nutrition provision.

Clinical Outcomes

Sufficient data were available for the analysis for 6 clinically relevant outcomes: in-hospital mortality, infective complications, anastomotic dehiscence, noninfectious complications, LOS, and GI tolerance.

Statistically significant reductions in infectious complications and LOS were found with perioperative and postoperative administration of pharmaconutrition (OR = 0.44, 95% CI = 0.24 to 0.81, $P = .001$; WMD = −2.57, 95% CI = 3.70 to −1.44, $P = .001$; and OR = 0.61, 95% CI = 0.47 to 0.79, $P < .01$; WMD = −2.30, 95% CI = −3.71 to −0.89, $P = .001$, respectively). Perioperative administration was also associated with a statistically significant reduction in anastomotic dehiscence (OR = 0.39, 95% CI = 0.17–0.93, $P = .03$), whereas a reduction in noninfective complications was demonstrated with postoperative administration of pharmaconutrition (OR = 0.70, 95% CI = 0.52–0.94, $P = .02$). No significant difference in mortality was demonstrated irrespective of timing of pharmaconutrition. Preoperative pharmaconutrition demonstrated no notable advantage over standard nutrition provision in any of the

Table 1. Pharmaconutrition Interventions of Included Randomized Controlled Trials.

Author, Year	Timing of Administration	Feeding Protocol	Nutrition Goal	Pharmaconutrition Product	Control Product
McCarter et al, 1998[12]	Preoperative	Oral supplements in addition to normal meals for ≥7 days	750 mL/d	Not stated	Not stated
Braga et al, 2002[7]	Preoperative	Oral supplements in addition to normal diet for 5 days	1000 mL/d	Oral Impact (Novartis, Bern, Switzerland)	Not stated
Okamoto et al, 2009[46]	Preoperative	Oral supplements in addition to standard hospital diet for 7 days	750 mL/d	Impact (Ajinomoto Pharm Co, Tokyo, Japan)	MEDIF (Ajinomoto Pharm Co, Tokyo, Japan)
Gunerhan et al, 2009[15]	Preoperative	7 days, route unspecified	Individual requirements (Harris-Benedict equation)	Impact (Novartis Nutrition, Bern, Switzerland)	Fresubin (details not stated)
Senkal et al, 1999[44]	Perioperative	Oral supplements ≥5 days in addition to normal hospital diet preoperatively; jejunal feeding commenced 12 hours postoperatively and continued until at least POD5	1000 mL/d preoperatively; 1920 mL/d reached by POD5	Impact (Novartis, Bern, Switzerland)	Not stated
Braga et al, 1999[5]	Perioperative	Oral supplements for 7 days preoperatively in addition to normal food as desired; jejunal feeding 6 hours postoperatively and increased to goal by POD3. Oral intake from POD7; unclear when jejunal feeding ceased.	1000 mL/d preoperatively; 1500 mL postoperatively	Impact (Novartis, Bern, Switzerland)	Not stated
Daly et al, 1988[47]	Postoperative	Jejunal feeding commenced POD1 and continued to POD7. Clear fluids until POD7; oral intake recommenced POD7.	Individual requirements (25 kcal/kg)	Nutrisource Modular Diet (Sandoz Nutrition, Minneapolis, MN) + 25g L-arginine	Nutrisource Modular Diet (Sandoz Nutrition, Minneapolis, MN) + 43g L-glycine
Daly et al, 1992[41]	Postoperative	Jejunal feeding commenced POD1 and discontinued when patient could meet "adequate" intake orally.	Individual requirements (25 kcal/kg)	Impact (Sandoz Nutrition, Minneapolis, MN)	Osmolite HN (Ross Laboratories, Columbus, OH)
Daly et al, 1995[4]	Postoperative	Jejunal feeding commenced from POD1 and continued until fluids and foods taken by mouth.	Individual requirements (25 kcal/kg)	Impact (Sandoz Nutrition, Minneapolis, MN)	Traumacal (Bristol-Myers Squibb, Evansville, IN)
Schilling et al, 1996[11]	Postoperative	Small bowel feeding commenced "as early as possible"; duration of feeding and time to goal rate not stated.	Individual requirements (25 kcal/kg)	Impact (Sandoz Nutrition Ltd, Bern, Switzerland)	Fresubin (Fresenius AG, Stans, Switzerland)

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Author, Year	Timing of Administration	Feeding Protocol	Nutrition Goal	Pharmaconutrition Product	Control Product
Senkal et al, 1997[42]	Postoperative	Jejunal feeding commenced 12 hours postoperatively. Clear fluids commenced between POD5 and POD7. Unclear when jejunal feeds ceased.	Individual requirements (25 kcal/kg)	Impact (Sandoz Nutrition, Bern, Switzerland)	Not stated
Gianotti et al, 2000[6]	Postoperative	Jejunal feeding commenced 6 hours postoperatively and ceased when oral intake provided ~800 kcal/d.	Individual requirements (25kcal/kg)	Impact (Sandoz Nutrition Ltd, Bern, Switzerland)	Not stated
Jiang et al, 2004[43]	Postoperative	Jejunal feeding commenced POD1 and continued until POD7.	Individual requirements (30 kcal/kg)	Stresson Multifibre (Nutricia, Zoetermeer, Holland)	Nutrison Multifibre (Nutricia, Zoetermeer, Holland)
Chen et al, 2005[49]	Postoperative	Jejunal feeds commenced POD2 postoperatively and continued to POD9	Individual requirements (30 kcal/kg)	Stresson (Nutricia China, Shanghai, China)	Nutrison (Nutricia China, Shanghai, China)
Ferreras et al, 2005[9]	Postoperative	Jejunal feeds commenced 12–18 hours postoperatively and continued to POD7.		Impact (Novartis Consumer Health, Spain)	Isosource Protein (Novartis Consumer Health, Spain)
Lobo et al, 2006[39]	Postoperative	Jejunal feeds commenced 4 hours postoperatively and continued to POD10–15	75 mL/h over 20 h/d	Stresson (Nutricia Ltd, Zoetermeer, Netherlands)	Nutrison High Protein (Nutricia Ltd, Zoetermeer, Netherlands)
Klek et al, 2008[13]	Postoperative	Jejunal feeds commenced 6 hours postoperatively and continued to POD7.	2400 mL/d	Reconvan (Fresenius Kabi, Warszawa, Poland)	Peptisorb (Nutricia Ltd, Warszawa, Poland)
Klek et al, 2008[14]	Postoperative	Jejunal feeds commenced 6 hours postoperatively and continued to POD7.	2400 mL/d	Stresson (Nutricia Ltd)	Peptisorb (Nutricia Ltd, Warszawa, Poland)
Sodergren et al, 2010[45]	Postoperative	Jejunal feeds commenced POD1 and continued to POD5, with a possible extension period to a maximum of POD15.	Individual requirements (25 kcal/kg)	Prototype to Intestamin (Fresenius-Kabi, Bad Homburg, Germany)	Not stated
Klek et al, 2011[40]	Postoperative	Jejunal feeds commenced 6 hours postoperatively and continued until POD7.	~2000 mL/d provided over 20–22 hours	Reconvan (Fresenius-Kabi, Warszawa, Poland)	Peptisorb (Nutricia, Warszawa, Poland)

POD, postoperative day.

clinical outcomes assessed. Results are summarized in Tables 7–9, and selected Forest plots are presented in Figures 2–5.

Omission of studies[45,47] using noncommercially available products did not alter the outcomes obtained in the sensitivity analyses (data not presented).

Heterogeneity

In general, there was a high degree of accord between the outcomes in the included studies, with significant heterogeneity only detected in LOS. The latter was consistent across all timings of pharmaconutrition administration for this outcome.

Table 2. Preoperative Pharmaconutrition Study Characteristics.

Author (Year)/ Country	Study Population	Study Design	Std EN (n)	PhN EN (n)	Study End Points	Source of Funding	Malnutrition Rates, %	Jadad Score (R/B/W)
McCarter et al[12] (1998)/ United States	Gastric, esophageal, pancreatic Ca	Std EN vs high Arg EN vs high Arg/ EFAs EN	11	14	Not stated but appears to be immune and clinical outcomes	Supported in part by a grant from Novartis Nutrition Corporation (Minneapolis, MN)	20	4 (1/2/1)
Braga et al[7] (2002)/Italy	Colorectal Ca	Preoperative PhN oral + PhN EN postoperatively vs preoperative PhN oral vs preoperative Std oral vs no supplementation preoperatively, NBM postoperatively	50	50	Not directly stated.Hypotheses involve immune-metabolic variables, morbidity, and LOS.	Products provided by Novartis Consumer Health, (Bern, Switzerland)	10	2 (2/0/0)
Okamoto et al[46] (2009)/ Japan	Gastric Ca	PhN EN vs Std EN	30	30	Postoperative cellular immunity; postoperative infectious and noninfectious complications; SIRS	NR	NR	2 (2/0/0)
Gunerhan et al[15] (2009)/ Turkey	Unspecified GIT Ca	PhN EN vs normal diet vs Std EN	11	13	Nutrition parameters; cellular immunity	NR	100	2 (1/0/1)

Arg, arginine; Ca, cancer; EFA, essential fatty acids; EN, enteral nutrition; GIT, gastrointestinal; LOS, length of stay; NBM, nil by mouth; NR, not reported; PhN, pharmaconutrition formulation; R/B/W, randomization (out of 2)/blinding (out of 2)/withdrawals (out of 1); SIRS, systemic inflammatory response syndrome; Std, standard composition formulation.

Table 3. Perioperative Pharmaconutrition Study Characteristics.

Author (Year)/ Country	Study Population	Study Design	Std EN (n)	PhN EN (n)	Study End Points	Source of Funding	Malnutrition Rates, %	Jadad Score (R/B/W)
Braga et al[5] (1999)/Italy	Gastric, pancreatic, and colorectal Ca	PhN EN vs Std EN	86	85	Reduction of infectious complications	Diets provided by Novartis Nutrition (Bern, Switzerland)	23	5 (2/2/1)
Senkal et al[44] (1999)/ Germany	UGI and pancreatic Ca	PhN EN vs Std EN	76	78	Primary outcome: infectious complications after POD3 or POD5	Unclear—4 organizations are thanked (including Nutricia, Bern, Switzerland) although reasons not stated	NR	4 (1/2/1)

Ca, cancer; EN, enteral nutrition; NR, not reported; PhN, pharmaconutrition formulation; POD, postoperative day; R/B/W, randomization (out of 2)/ blinding (out of 2)/withdrawals (out of 1); Std, standard composition formulation; UGI, upper gastrointestinal.

Table 4. Postoperative Pharmaconutrtition Study Characteristics.

Author (Year)/ Country	Study Population	Study Design	Std EN (n)	PhN EN (n)	Study End Points	Source of Funding	Malnutrition Rates, %	Jadad Score (R/B/W)
Daly et al[47] (1988)/USA	UGI, pancreatic, colorectal Ca (97%), melanoma (3%)	Arginine-supplemented Std EN vs glycine-supplemented Std EN	14	16	Not stated but appears to be immune, metabolic, and clinical outcomes	Supported by Georgene S. Harmelin Surgical Oncology Research Grant, a grant from Sandoz, and NIH grant 19525.	56	3 (1/2/0)
Daly et al[41] (1992)/USA	UGI, pancreatic Ca	PhN EN vs Std EN	44	41	Not stated but appears to be nutrition, immune, metabolic, and clinical outcomes	Supported by Georgene S. Harmelin Surgical Oncology Research Grant, a grant from Sandoz, and NIH grant 19525.	35	3 (2/0/1)
Daly et al[4] (1995)/USA	UGI, pancreatic Ca	PhN EN (inpt ± outpt) vs Std EN (inpt ± outpt)*Only inpatient data were used for this analysis.*	30	30	Clinical outcome, white cell fatty acid composition, PGE_2 secretion	Supported by Georgene S. Harmelin Surgical Oncology Research Fund, NIH training grant 3-T32-CA-09619, and Sandoz Nutrition	30	3 (2/0/1)
Schilling et al[11] (1996)/ Switzerland	UGI, pancreatic, or colorectal Ca	PhN EN vs Std vs low-calorie/ low-fat IV solution	14	14	Not stated but appears to be immune function	Supported in part by Sandoz Nutrition Ltd	NR	2 (1/0/1)
Senkal et al[42] (1997)/ Germany	UGI, pancreatic Ca	PhN EN vs Std EN	77	77	Not stated but appears to be clinical outcome and costs	Supported in part by Sandoz Nutrition Ltd	NR	5 (2/2/1)
Gianotti et al[6] (2000)/Italy	Pancreatic Ca	PhN EN vs Std EN vs Std PN	73	71	Not stated but appears to be immunometabolic parameters and clinical outcome	Partially supported by Novartis Nutrition (Bern, Switzerland)	60	2 (2/0/0)
Jiang et al[43] (2004)/ China	UGI, colorectal Ca (81%); other Ca (7%); other diseases (12%)	PhN EN vs Std EN	60	60	Not stated but appears to be immune function, inflammatory response, and infectious complications	None stated	NR	2 (1/0/1)
Chen et al[49] (2005)/ China	Gastric Ca	PhN EN vs Std EN	20	20	Inflammatory and immunological parameters	NR	NR	1 (1/0/0)
Ferreras et al[9] (2005)/ Spain	Gastric Ca	PhN EN vs Std EN	30	30	Primary: postoperative wound healingSecondary: infectious complications, morbidity, LOS	Supported in part by Novartis Consumer Health, Spain	20	5 (2/2/1)

(continued)

Table 4. (continued)

Author (Year)/ Country	Study Population	Study Design	Std EN (n)	PhN EN (n)	Study End Points	Source of Funding	Malnutrition Rates, %	Jadad Score (R/B/W)
Lobo et al[39] (2006)/UK	UGI Ca	PhN EN vs Std EN	54	54	Primary: infectious complications Secondary: noninfective complications, mortality, LOS	Dr Lobo: research fellowship from Special Trustees of the University Hospital, Queen's Medical Centre, Nottingham. Dr Crowe: grant from Nutricia Clinical Care, UK. Feeds provided gratis by Nutricia Clinical Care, UK.States funding sources were not involved in the design or execution of the study or in the publication of the work.	NR	5 (2/2/1)
Klek et al[13] (2008)/ Poland	Gastric, pancreatic Ca	PhN EN vs Std EN	91	92	Postoperative complications, LOS, liver/ kidney/immune function, treatment tolerance	Conflict of interest denied; funding source NR	9	3 (2/0/1)
Klek et al[14] (2008)/ Poland	Gastric, pancreatic Ca	PhN EN vs Std EN vs PhN PN vs. Std PN	53	52	Infectious complications in well-nourished patients	NR	16	3 (2/0/1)
Sodergren et al[45] (2010)/ UK	UGI surgery (96%); other (4%)	PhN EN vs Std EN	21	23	Primary: C-reactive protein, prealbumin, retinol binding protein Secondary: clinical, infections, safety, tolerance, biochemical	Fresenius Kabi Clinical Research Department (Bad Homburg, Germany)—actively involved in the randomization process.	NR	3 (2/1/0)
Klek et al[40] (2011)/ Poland	Gastric, pancreatic Ca	PhN EN vs Std EN	153	152	Primary: postoperative complications Secondary: LOS, immune function, liver and kidney function	Conflict of interest denied; funding source NR	100	3 (2/0/1)

Ca, cancer; EN, enteral nutrition; inpt, inpatient; LOS, length of stay; NIH, National Institutes of Health; NR, not reported; outpt, outpatient; PGE_2, prostaglandin E_2; PhN, pharmaconutrition formulation; PN, parenteral nutrition; R/B/W, randomization (out of 2)/blinding (out of 2)/withdrawals (out of 1); Std, standard composition formulation; UGI, upper gastrointestinal.

Table 5. Pharmaconutrition Products Used Within Included Studies.

Product	Energy, kcal, per L	Protein, g, per L	Pharmaconutrients, per L
Oral Impact	1010	56	12.5 g arginine, 3.3 g ω-3 fatty acid, RNA quantity not stated
Impact	1000 or 1015	56 or 59	12.5 g arginine, 3.3 g ω-3 fatty acid, 1.2 g RNA
Nutrisource Modular Diet + 25 g L-arginine	1090	45	25 g additional arginine
Stresson Multifibre or Stresson	1250	75	8.9 g arginine, 13 g glycineω-6:ω-3 ratio 3.45:1
Reconvan	1000	55	NS
Prototype to Intestamin	NS	NS	Arginine, glutamine, ω-3, tributyrin, vitamins C and E, β-carotene, and micronutrients

NS, not stated.

Table 6. Standard Nutrition Products Used Within Included Studies.

Product	Energy, kcal, per L	Protein, g, per L
MEDIF	Isocaloric	Isonitrogenous
Fresubin	1000	38
Nutrisource Modular Diet + 43 g L-glycine	1090	45
Osmolite HN	1070	45
Traumacal	1115	62
Nutrison Multifibre	1000	40
Nutrison	1000	40
Isosource Protein	1220	66
Nutrison High Protein	1250	75
Peptisorb	1000	40

Table 7. Summary of Pooled Data of Preoperative Pharmaconutrition vs Standard Nutrition.

		Test for Overall Effect		Test for Heterogeneity		
Outcome Variables	Pooled OR WMD (95% CI)	*Z*	*P* Value	*Q*	*P* Value	I^2 Index, % (CI [LL, UL])
Mortality	1.21 (0.22 to 6.64)	0.22	.82	0.27	.99	0 [0; 0]
Infective complications	0.56 (0.22 to 1.47)	−1.17	.24	7.2	.12	44.5 [0; 79.6]
Anastomotic dehiscence	0.79 (0.30 to 2.08)	−0.47	.64	2.2	.53	0 [0; 79.1]
Noninfective complications	1.97 (0.78 to 4.94)	1.44	.15	0.49	.97	0 [0; 0]
Length of stay	1.21 (–2.31 to 4.74)	0.67	.50	28.47	<.01	89.5 [75.8; 95.4]
Intolerance symptoms	0.66 (0.30 to 1.44)	−1.04	.30	1.92	.38	0 [0; 89.2]

CI, confidence interval; OR, odds ratio; WMD, weighted mean difference; LL, lower limit; UL, upper limit.

Publication Bias

Funnel plots demonstrate symmetry and thus suggest the absence of publication bias for all outcomes except LOS (Figure 6).

Discussion

This meta-analysis both confirms previous findings regarding arginine-dominant pharmaconutrition and provides further insight into the effects of its use. First, it continues to show no adverse effect on postoperative mortality in elective GI surgical populations. It also supports the commonly accepted benefits of arginine-dominant pharmaconutrition with relation to reductions in postoperative infective complications, but these benefits were only seen in peri- and postoperative pharmaconutrition administration in the current work. Similarly, reductions in LOS were noted in peri- and postoperative administration, but heterogeneity evidenced by a high I^2 index

Table 8. Summary of Pooled Data of Perioperative Pharmaconutrition vs Standard Nutrition.

		Test for Overall Effect			Test for Heterogeneity	
Outcome Variables	Pooled OR WMD (95% CI)	*Z*	*P* Value	*Q*	*P* Value	I^2 Index, %*
Mortality	0.51 (0.04 to 6.17)	−0.53	.60	0.17	.68	0
Infective complications	0.44 (0.24 to 0.81)	−2.62	.00	0.67	.41	0
Anastomotic dehiscence	0.39 (0.17 to 0.93)	−2.13	.03	0.27	.60	0
Noninfective complications	0.79 (0.29 to 2.17)	−0.45	.65	0.34	.56	0
Length of stay	−2.57 (−3.70 to −1.44)	−3.02	.00	3.68	.05	72.9

CI, confidence interval; OR, odds ratio; WMD, weighted mean difference.
*CI not able to be computed due to k = 2

Table 9. Summary of pooled data of Postoperative Pharmaconutrition versus Standard Nutrition.

		Test for Overall Effect			Test for Heterogeneity	
Outcome Variables	Pooled OR WMD (95% CI)	*Z*	*P* Value	*Q*	*P* Value	I^2 Index, % (CI [LL, UL])
Mortality	0.85 (0.45 to 1.59)	−0.51	.61	6.04	.95	0 [0; 3.3]
Infective complications	0.61 (0.47 to 0.79)	−3.80	<.01	11.81	.54	0 [0; 50.5]
Anastomotic dehiscence	0.72 (0.37 to 1.40)	−0.96	.34	0.73	.99	0 [0; 0]
Noninfective complications	0.70 (0.52 to 0.94)	−2.38	.02	6.12	.80	0 [0; 35]
Length of stay	−2.30 (−3.71 to −0.89)	−3.20	.00	69.71	<.01	85.7 [76.1; 91.4]
Gastrointestinal intolerance symptoms	0.69 (0.44 to 1.08)	−1.63	.10	2.7	.61	0 [0; 69.2]

CI, confidence interval; OR, odds ratio; WMD, weighted mean difference; LL, lower limit; UL, upper limit.

and publication bias present in these data makes it difficult to draw concrete conclusions on this parameter.

Distinct differences in the attributed benefits of pharmaconutrition and the timing of its administration are an important finding of this meta-analysis. Previous meta-analyses performing a priori analyses on the timing of pharmaconutrition report benefit irrespective of when in the clinical course it is provided.[19,20] One notable exception is that preoperative pharmaconutrition was not shown to reduce LOS by Cerantola et al.[20] The current work demonstrates no benefit from the provision of preoperative pharmaconutrition across any of the outcomes assessed. A possible explanation for this is the stricter inclusion criteria applied to minimize heterogeneity. Thus, the results reported may be a truer indication of the effect of preoperative pharmaconutrition in this surgical population. The pharmacokinetics of pharmaconutrients may assist in understanding this finding. Serum arginine levels have been shown to significantly increase following 7 days of preoperative[12,50] and postoperative administration.[41,51] Sustained elevated serum levels have been demonstrated at POD8 with perioperative administration.[50] However, no study appears to have investigated the postoperative serum levels of patients receiving preoperative pharmaconutrients as a standalone intervention. It is therefore conceivable that the cessation of pharmaconutrition on the day of surgery may result in subtherapeutic or declining levels of circulating pharmaconutrients within the postoperative period when their action may be most valuable. Beta-error (false negative) may also play a part in the findings reported in this and/or previous meta-analyses given the small number of studies investigating preoperative pharmaconutrition interventions.

The current work further suggests that pharmaconutrition may provide additional benefits in terms of reduction of anastomotic dehiscence and noninfective complications in perioperative and postoperative administration respectively—these phenomena have not previously been reported in association with arginine-dominant pharmaconutrition. Reduced noninfectious complications in postoperative pharmaconutrition provision may potentially be explained by the higher caloric and/or nitrogen content of many of the pharmaconutrition formulations when compared with the control formulations. Six of the 14 studies (42%) included in the postoperative meta-analysis use intervention products that contain between 20% and 46% more protein[11,14,40,43,47,49] and/or up to 600 kcal (20%) more energy[14] than the control formulations. In a GI surgical population with a high prevalence of malnutrition, the higher overall nutrition provision may be enough to account for this unexpected finding given that malnourished patients experience more profound improvements in clinical outcomes attributable to nutrition provision than their well-nourished counterparts.[52] This explanation, however, does not adequately explain the reduced anastomotic dehiscence reported with the

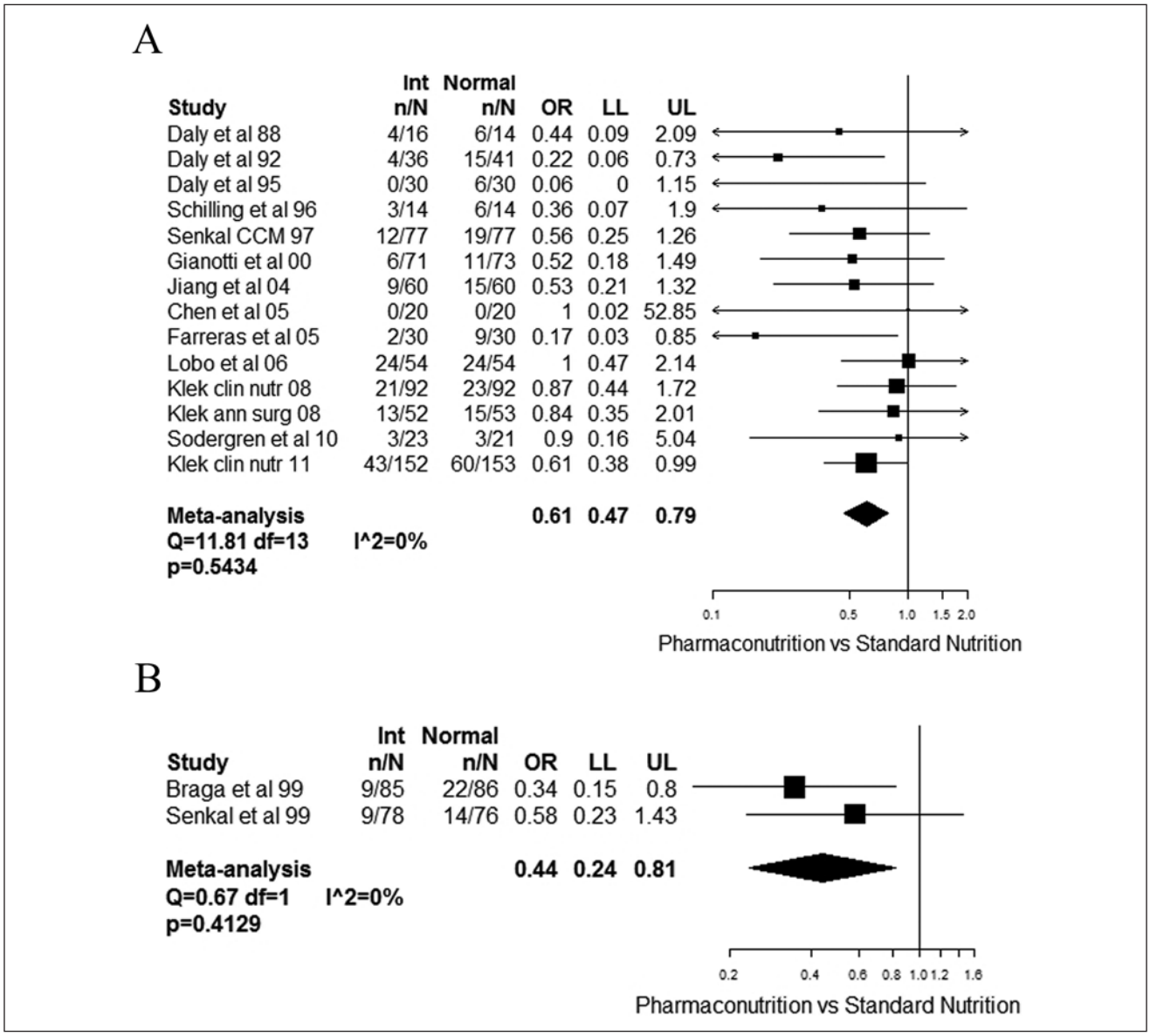

Figure 2. (A) Infectious complications: postoperative administration. (B) Infectious complications: perioperative administration. The boxes in A and B represent individual studies with the size of each corresponding to the attributed weighting under a random-effects model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The diamond represents the pooled effect size, with its length representing the width of the confidence interval. Vertical line represents the line of no effect (null hypothesis).

perioperative administration of pharmaconutrition as these used comparable products for both arms of their studies. As leukocytosis is recognized as a risk factor for anastomotic dehiscence,[53] it seems plausible that the reduction in infective complications associated with pharmaconutrition may provide additional protection in the surgical anastomosis through this mechanism. However, given the small number of perioperative studies analyzed (k = 2), beta-error may also be a plausible explanation for this finding.

Although 7 meta-analyses on this topic already exist, limitations contained within these justify a further meta-analysis. Heyland et al,[23] Beale et al,[24] and Heys et al[22] all include elective surgical patients as a subgroup analysis of meta-analyses on the critically ill. Although all use inclusion criteria comparable to the current work, there have been many RCTs eligible for inclusion since their publication. Waitzberg et al[18] conducted a meta-analysis on studies published before 2003 that used the commercially available product, Impact (Novartis

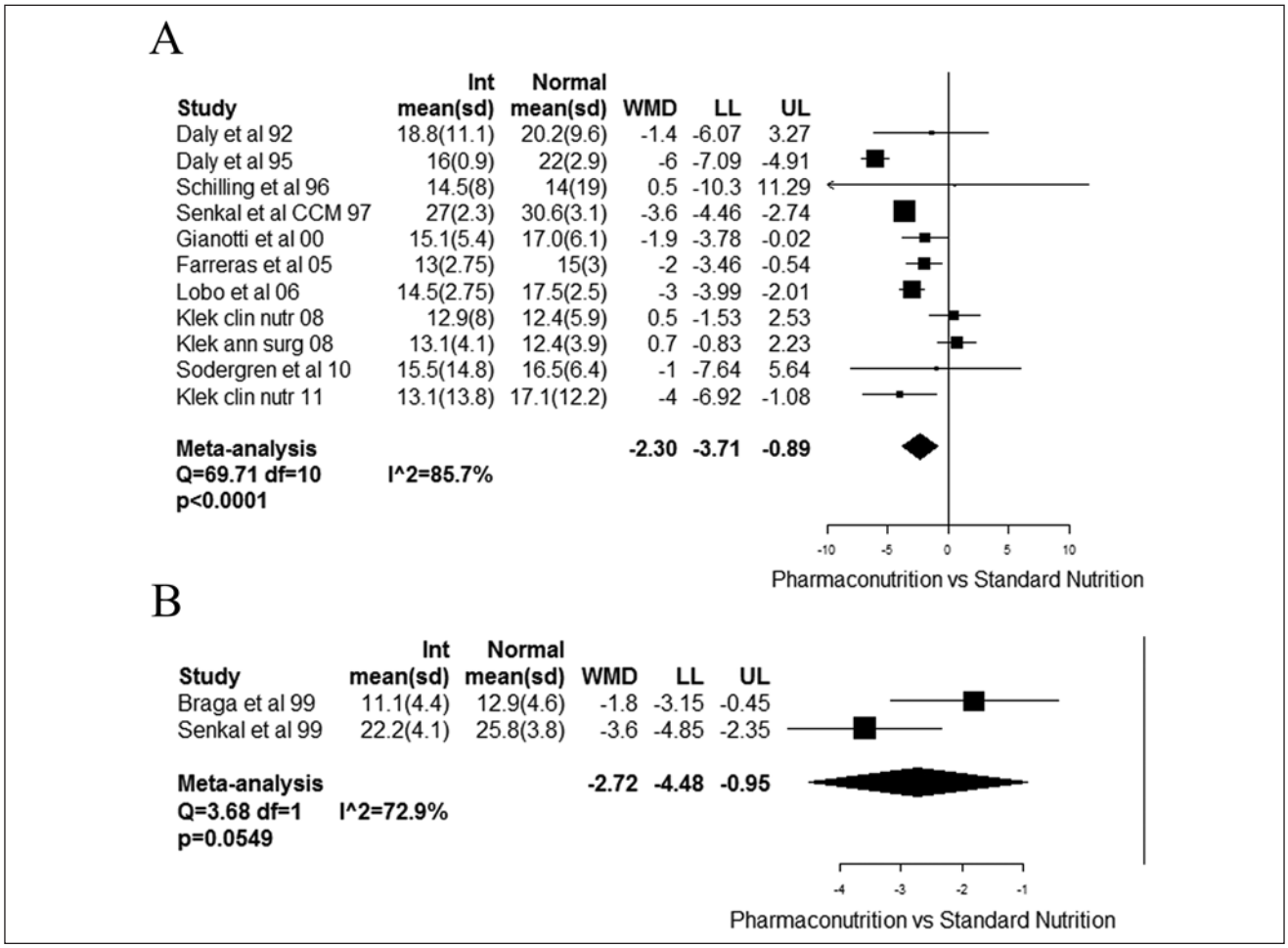

Figure 3. (A) Length of stay (LOS): postoperative administration. (B) LOS: perioperative administration. The boxes in A and B represent individual studies with the size of each corresponding to the attributed weighting under a random-effects model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The diamond represents the pooled effect size, with its length representing the width of the confidence interval. Vertical line represents the line of no effect (null hypothesis).

Consumer Health, Bern, Switzerland). This meta-analysis included cardiac surgery with an otherwise largely GI surgery population and included studies that used nonequivalent control groups such as intravenous fluids or crystalloids, or nil-by-mouth. The heterogeneity introduced through these inclusions, the exclusion of studies conducted using other similarly composed commercial products, and the suggestion that this meta-analysis has been funded by Novartis result in the need to interpret the outcomes of this analysis with caution.

Zheng and others[21] restrict inclusion criteria to GI surgery but make no attempt to control for the differences within the administration of pharmaconutrition between studies. Furthermore, an additional 10 studies have been identified as being published since 2006 that were not available to be included in this study.

Marik and Zaloga[19] compared the effect of arginine and/or ω-3 containing pharmaconutrition products with standard formulations and included a priori analyses on differing compositions and timing of pharmaconutrition. Their results are difficult to apply to practice, due to the heterogeneous surgical populations included (head and neck, cardiac, GI) and the significant methodological flaw of performing meta-analysis statistics in instances where only 1 study met the inclusion criteria.[54]

The most recent meta-analysis was published by Cerantola et al[20] in 2011. This study incorporated recently published studies on an exclusively GI surgical population, addressed the timing of pharmaconutrition provision through performing subgroup analyses, and is the first meta-analysis on this topic to comply with PRISMA reporting guidelines. However, it also

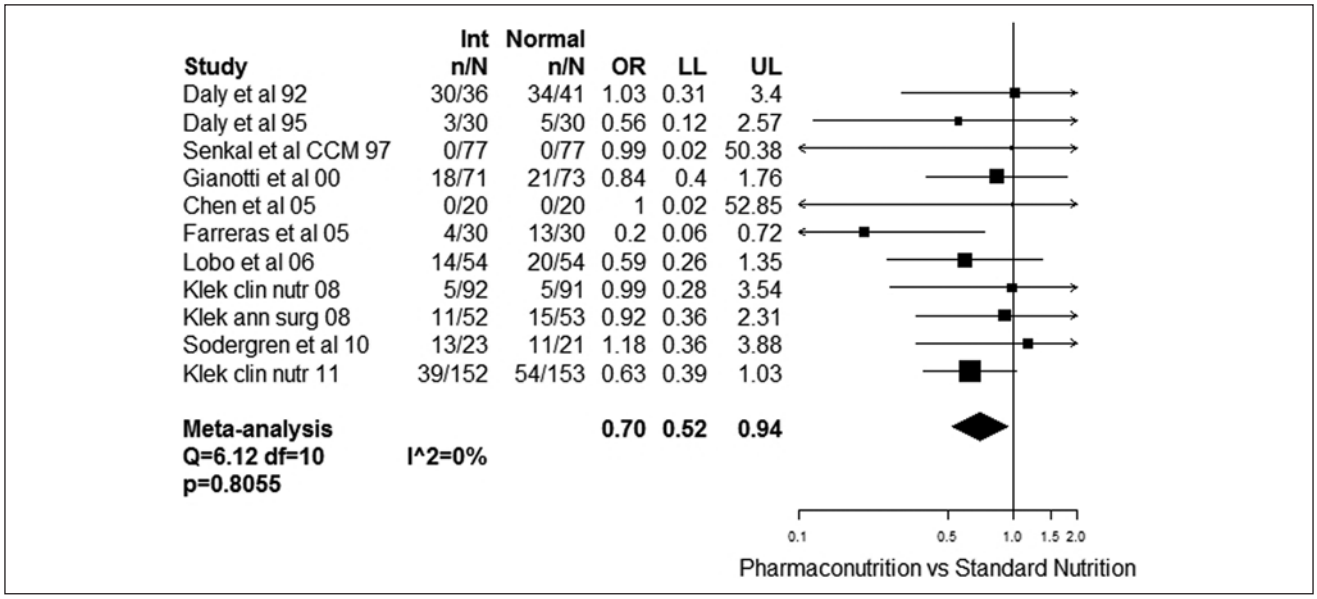

Figure 4. Noninfectious complications: postoperative administration. The boxes represent individual studies with the size of each corresponding to the attributed weighting under a random-effects model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The diamond represents the pooled effect size, with its length representing the width of the confidence interval. Vertical line represents the line of no effect (null hypothesis).

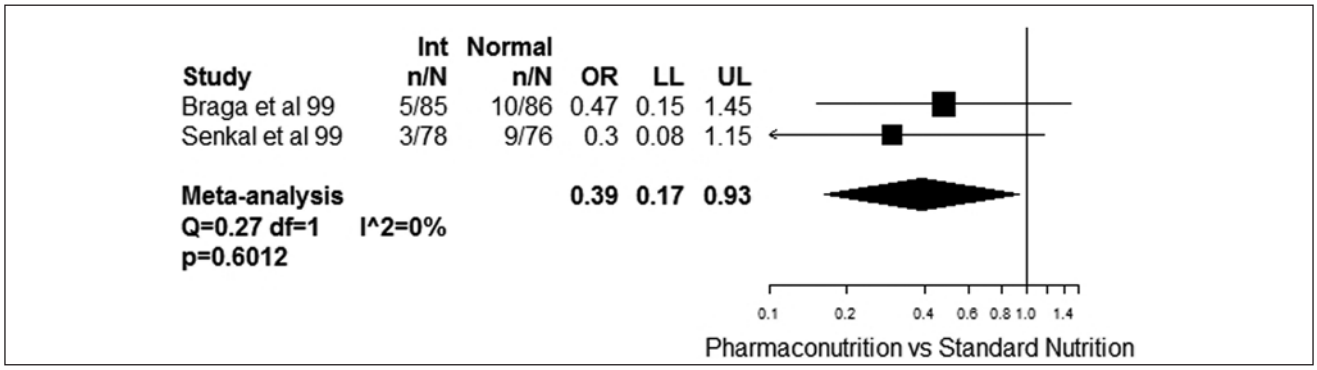

Figure 5. Anastomotic dehiscence: perioperative administration. The boxes represent individual studies with the size of each corresponding to the attributed weighting under a random-effects model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The diamond represents the pooled effect size, with its length representing the width of the confidence interval. Vertical line represents the line of no effect (null hypothesis).

includes studies that use nonequivalent control groups[7,8,10,55]: this may produce outcomes that appear to favor pharmaconutrition independent of the role of immune-enhancing components.

For these reasons, the current work has attempted to contribute to the literature on this topic through producing a meta-analysis that uses stricter inclusion criteria with regard to the control group (as far as the literature allows) and to exclusively analyze studies according to the timing of pharmaconutrition delivery. We believe this issue is of vital importance to guide the translation of research to clinical practice.

This meta-analysis is not without its limitations. First, there are variations in the composition of included pharmaconutrition products that may confound the results obtained. The decision to allow inclusion of studies using products containing arginine with or without other pharmaconutrients was based on consideration that arginine has been the most consistently used pharmaconutrient in elective GI surgical populations and remains the consistent ingredient that links commercial and experimental formulas in this genre of products. Other pharmaconutrients included in the commercially available formulas have limited clinical evidence of individual benefit when

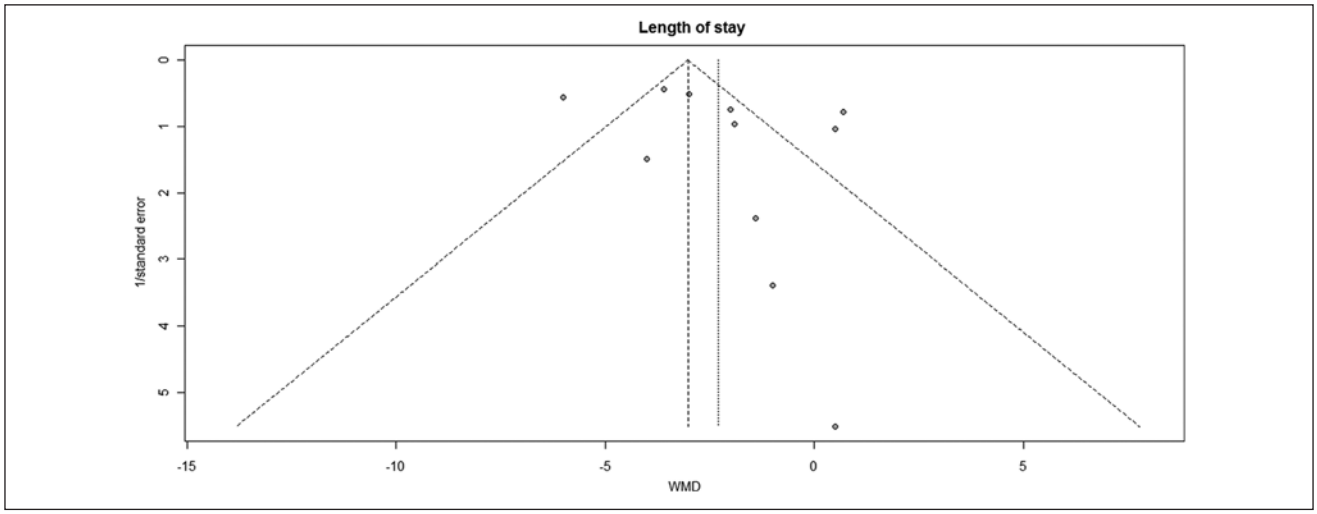

Figure 6. Funnel plot for length of stay (LOS): postoperative administration. The points correspond to the treatment effects (log weighted mean difference [WMD]) from 11 individual studies, and the diagonal lines show the expected 95% confidence intervals around the pooled fixed effect log WMD estimate.

provided enterally in this patient group in the absence of arginine. On this basis, we argue that there is clinical relevance to classifying the intervention products as "arginine-dominant."

Second, although all studies described the nutrition goals for their patients throughout the study period, few quantified the amount of nutrition actually received. We have therefore been forced to assume that nutrition goals were consistently met unless otherwise stated. This has obvious implications for the conclusions drawn, as reduced nutrition provision for reasons such as feed intolerance, noncompliance with oral supplements, tube-related complications, or protocol deviations may have reduced the provision of nutrients and therefore may confound the results obtained. This aspect of reporting trials on pharmaconutrition needs to be addressed in future studies on this topic.

Third, most pharmaconutrition studies have been funded at least in part by the companies that manufacture the products being investigated. This is of concern as funding bias is recognized for its potential to influence the results in favor of the product being investigated in pharmaceutical studies.[56,57] As meta-analysis is known to amplify biases included in the individual studies, the concern that funding bias may be present and has the potential to exaggerate the beneficial effects of pharmaconutrition should not be overlooked: this is true of both the current work and the existing meta-analyses on this topic. This is of particular concern given the increasing acceptance that pharmaconutrition has found in clinical practice through its incorporation into clinical guidelines.[16,17] Interestingly, discussion of this aspect of pharmaconutrition is notably absent from the literature at the present time.

Closely tied to concerns regarding funding bias is the frequent use of noncomparable control groups: this is a commonly observed trend in pharmaceutically funded studies that are subsequently shown to favor the intervention product.[57] Significantly different protein contents between some of the intervention and control products were noted in several of the included studies. One such example is the Klek et al[14] study that uses Peptisorb (Nutricia Ltd, Warszawa, Poland) (40 g protein/L; 1 kcal/mL) as the control product against Stresson (Nutricia Ltd, Poland) (75 g protein/L; 1.25 kcal/mL). Although the lack of reporting of received nutrition makes the significance of these differences on the current work impossible to evaluate, even in studies that use individualized nutrition goals based on caloric targets, such marked differences in formulations may ultimately undermine the controlled nature of individual studies due to the lack of an appropriate control group.

We made multiple attempts to contact authors for additional information or clarification of data within their publications but with disappointing response rates. In the absence of response from the group from Milan, Italy, who published many of the studies on this topic in the mid-1990s and early 2000s, we excluded any of their studies we strongly suspected of representing multiple reports on the same patients.[58-60] It is clear from the published reports, however, that in so doing, we have excluded approximately 80 otherwise eligible patients with gastric cancer who we could not include without a high likelihood of duplicating analyses on patients with pancreatic cancer included in other studies.[6]

Furthermore, several potentially relevant sources were identified ("Sydney" study in Waitzberg et al,[18] Jiang et al[38] [in Chinese], and an abstract for Yao et al[37] [in Chinese]), but adequate data to assess them for inclusion were unavailable despite our best efforts to obtain these. This unfortunate situation suggests the presence of location bias within the present work.

Finally, this meta-analysis retains the unavoidable heterogeneity introduced by the failure of the included studies to report the results of individual surgical procedures. This is significant as the complications likely to occur after procedures performed at various locations along the GI tract vary greatly, and as such, the indiscriminate grouping of these may confound the complications reported, and thus the effect attributed to the pharmaconutrition interventions provided.

This meta-analysis has highlighted areas for future research. As described above, the nutrition aspects of studies on this topic, including the reporting of nutrition consumption in both groups throughout the study period and the need for careful selection of control formulas, are potential confounders in many of the existing published studies. Dietitians are largely absent from the authorship of the studies to date, and it seems likely that a more multidisciplinary approach to the research in this area is necessary and is likely to alleviate these oversights in future studies. Second, convincing data supporting significant economic benefit related to the use of pharmaconutrition over standard nutrition products remain scarce in the literature. A strong body of evidence supporting the cost-benefit of pharmaconutrition is going to be increasingly vital to justify its continued use in health care environments that are increasingly subjected to financial scrutiny in these difficult economic times.

Conclusions

Although this meta-analysis lends support to the acknowledged beneficial effects of pharmaconutrition in the management of elective GI surgical patients, it highlights the importance of timing of administration as a clinical consideration. Contrary to previous findings, preoperative pharmaconutrition failed to deliver any benefit over standard formulations when used as a standalone intervention. The accepted benefits of pharmaconutrition (reduction in infectious complications and LOS) were only reported in peri- and postoperative administration, and limitations in the LOS data obscure the conclusions we can draw on this outcome. It also suggests previously unreported benefits of pharmaconutrition with respect to reduced noninfective complications and anastomotic dehiscence in postoperative and perioperative administration, respectively. Better quality, multidisciplinary intervention, and cost-benefit studies are required to further clarify the remaining questions on this topic.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Drs Jianmin Xu, Glyn Jamieson, and Stanislaw Klek for their responses to queries regarding their publications.

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