Dysfunctional Tear Syndrome: A Delphi Approach to Treatment Recommendations

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Dysfunctional Tear Syndrome

A Delphi Approach to Treatment Recommendations

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Purpose: To develop current treatment recommendations for dry eye disease from consensus of expert advice.

Methods: Of 25 preselected international specialists on dry eye, 17 agreed to participate in a modified, 2-round Delphi panel approach. Based on available literature and standards of care, a survey was presented to each panelist. A two-thirds majority was used for consensus building from responses obtained. Treatment algorithms were created. Treatment recommendations for different types and severity levels of dry eye disease were the main outcome.

Results: A new term for dry eye disease was proposed: dysfunctional tear syndrome (DTS). Treatment recommendations were based primarily on patient symptoms and signs. Available diagnostic tests were considered of secondary importance in guiding therapy. Development of algorithms was based on the presence or absence of lid margin disease and disturbances of tear distribution and clearance. Disease severity was considered the most important factor for treatment decision-making and was categorized into 4 levels. Severity was assessed on the basis of tear substitute requirements, symptoms of ocular discomfort, and visual disturbance. Clinical signs present in lids, tear film, conjunctiva, and cornea were also used for categorization of severity. Consensus was reached on treatment algorithms for DTS with and without concurrent lid disease.

Conclusion: Panelist opinion relied on symptoms and signs (not tests) for selection of treatment strategies. Therapy is chosen to match disease severity and presence versus absence of lid margin disease or tear distribution and clearance disturbances.

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The syndrome known as "dry eye" is highly prevalent, affecting 14% to 33% of the population worldwide,[1–4] depending on the study and definition used. Symptoms related to dry eye are among the leading causes of patient visits to ophthalmologists and optometrists in the United States.[5] However, a stepwise approach to diagnosis and treatment is not well established.

Treatment algorithms are often complicated, especially when multiple therapeutic agents and strategies are available for one single disease and for different stages of the same disease. Dry eye syndrome is particularly challenging, because the diagnostic criteria used vary among studies, there is poor correlation between signs and symptoms, and efficacy criteria are often not uniform. As a result, there is no clear current approach to assign therapeutic recommendations as "first," "second," or "third" line.

Clinical research is usually oriented to assess the efficacy of medications in the treatment of dry eye disease. Reports are based on either comparisons of one medication relative to untreated placebo controls or comparisons between different therapies.[6,7] Categorization of treatment alternatives is usually not implicit in these studies. Strategies combining medications or medications and surgery are usually not clearly discussed in the literature. A panel of experts may be a good method to develop such strategies based on current knowledge, because publication of research may not precede practice. Furthermore, clinical trials are typically performed on highly selected populations with specific interventions that may not reflect the spectrum of disease encountered in usual practice.

Where unanimity of opinion does not exist because of a paucity of scientific evidence and where there is contradictory evidence, consensus methods can be useful. Such methods have been used in developing therapeutic algorithms in other ophthalmic (glaucoma) and nonophthalmic disease states.[8,9]

The Delphi panel technique was first proposed in 1946 by the RAND Corporation as a resource to collect information from different experts and to prepare a forecast of future technological capabilities. This tool has been expanded to technological,[10] health,[11] and social sciences research.[12] Despite some reasonable criticisms of this technique,[13] the Delphi approach has been used to provide reproducible consensus to create algorithms of treatment.[14,15]

In this study, we proposed to establish expert consensus by using the Delphi approach with an international panel to obtain current treatment recommendations for dry eye syndrome.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Panelist Selection

The ideal number of panelists expected with this technique is not well defined, with reported ranges from 10 to 1685.[16] No specific inclusion criteria are established, other than the qualification of panelists in the topic of interest. Some authors stress the importance of the diversity of panelists' opinion to obtain a wide base of knowledge.[17]

The following criteria were considered for inclusion of panelists:

1. Active clinicians (ophthalmologists and optometrists)
2. Scientific contributions to clinical research on dry eye syndrome, as reflected by at least 2 of the following: peer-reviewed publications, other forms of written scientific communication, specialty meeting presentations, and membership in special-interest groups focused on dry eye syndrome
3. International representation
4. Proficiency in English language to facilitate interaction
5. Able to respond to sets of questionnaires and available to attend a final meeting at the Wilmer Ophthalmological Institute in Baltimore, MD

The search for panelists' scientific contributions was conducted over available medical databases (Medline, EMBASE) and other major Internet-based search engines (Scirus.com, Google.com, Alltheweb.com). Twenty-five candidates from 3 continents that met the selection criteria were initially contacted.

A contract research organization (Analytica Group, New York, NY) was selected to act as moderator/facilitator for the questionnaire and panel meeting exercise. A 2-round modified Delphi approach was used.[18] A set of dry eye therapy literature was provided to each panel member along with the first-round questionnaire. These studies were selected in part from an ongoing systematic review of the literature on dry eye disease therapy. Three of the panelists suggested additions of some references that they considered valuable. Those citations were also disseminated to the rest of the panelists.

Preparation of Surveys

Questionnaires were based on collected literature, current practice patterns, and clinical experience in dry eye. Topics in the survey were related to pathophysiology, diagnostic tests, criteria used to guide treatment, and therapeutic alternatives.

Nominal variables were assigned binary values to tabulate responses in a spreadsheet (Excel 2002; Microsoft Corp., Redmond, WA) for analysis. Ordinal variables were originated from 5-point Likert scales to categorize the strength of agreement and facilitate the statistical analysis.

Survey questions were based on the use of the current classification of dry eye disease and the available guidelines for the treatment. Diagnostic methods and severity assessment were also surveyed. Panelists were asked to support their multilevel treatment recommendation with a categorical, nominal score of 1 to 3, depending on the level of evidence to sustain their decision:

1. Supported by a clinical trial
2. Supported by published literature of some type
3. Supported by my professional opinion

Finally, determinant factors influencing the treatment decision-making process were stratified semiquantitatively to evaluate the most representative for the selection of therapy.

Survey Deployment

The forms were deployed by electronic mail to the panelists. The information obtained from the surveys was tabulated and organized for presentation at the face-to-face meeting of the Delphi process.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the questionnaire data by using StatsDirect 2.3.7 for Windows (StatsDirect, Cheshire, UK).

Consensus

There exists controversy regarding the numbers necessary to obtain consensus. Some authors agree that a simple majority (>50%) is enough to constitute consensus,[19] whereas others propose that more than 80% of panelists should be in agreement to have the recommendation considered as consensual.[20] Degree of consensus has also been quantified statistically using the Cronbach α method, a method for measuring internal agreement.[21] For the purposes of this study, consensus was defined as a two-thirds majority.

Personal Interaction

The meeting was conducted by a facilitator (J.J.D.) with previous experience in consensus-building strategies.[8] Panelists reacted and discussed the data collected from the surveys over an intensive 1-day, 12-hour-long, face-to-face meeting. According to the tabulated initial responses, iterative discussions were conducted toward majority agreement.

RESULTS

Panelists' Response

From the initial selection of 25 candidates who met the inclusion criteria, 17 were able to participate in all stages of the study and therefore were included in the panel. The candidates who refused to join the panel did not have substantive reasons precluding their participation. Most of them declined to participate because of scheduling conflicts. The list of participants is shown in Table 1. All surveys deployed were returned with responses from all of the panelists.

TABLE 1. Experts Who Participated in the Delphi Approach (DTS Study Group)

Panelist Name	City	Country
Dimitri T. Azar, M.D.	Boston, MA	United States
Harminder S. Dua, M.D., Ph.D	Nottingham	England
Milton Hom, O.D.	Azusa, CA	United States
Paul M. Karpecki, O.D.	Overland Park, KS	United States
Peter R. Laibson, M.D.	Philadelphia, PA	United States
Michael A. Lemp, M.D.	Washington, DC	United States
David M. Meisler, M.D.	Cleveland, OH	United States
Juan Murube del Castillo, M.D., Ph.D.	Madrid	Spain
Terrence P. O'Brien, M.D.	Baltimore, MD	United States
Stephen C. Pflugfelder, M.D.	Houston, TX	United States
Maurizio Rolando, M.D.	Genoa	Italy
Oliver D. Schein, M.D., M.P.H.	Baltimore, MD	United States
Berthold Seitz, M.D.	Erlangen	Germany
Scheffer C. Tseng, M.D., Ph.D.	Miami, FL	United States
Gysbert B. van Setten, M.D., Ph.D.	Stockholm	Sweden
Steven E. Wilson, M.D.	Cleveland, OH	United States
Samuel C. Yiu, M.D, Ph.D.	Los Angeles, CA	United States

Conflicts of Interest

Travel expenses of panelists were covered by the contracted company (Analytica Group), which is an independent firm. The Wilmer Eye Institute originated the invitation, and panelists were unaware of any indirect support from pharmaceutical industry to avoid bias in the treatment selection.

Use of Existing Disease/Treatment Guidelines

The majority of panelists (11 of 17) responded that they did not follow any of the available guidelines for the treatment of dry eye syndrome. Three of 17 followed the National Eye Institute guidelines,[22] 1 of 17 followed the American Academy of Ophthalmology Preferred Practice Patterns,[23] 1 of 17 followed the Madrid classification,[24] and 1 of 17 followed a combination of the first 2 guidelines.

When panel members were asked about their opinions regarding the adherence of the ophthalmic community to new, simplified guidelines for the treatment of dry eye, the majority (13 of 17) agreed that they would use them if most recent findings on the disease were included. Those who responded that they would not use them (4 of 17), based their response on the low sensitivity and specificity of the available tests for the diagnosis of dry eye and the variability of the clinical presentation in different patients.

Diagnostic Tests for Dry Eye

When panelists were surveyed before the meeting on diagnostic measures used to detect dry eye, the most frequently cited tests were slit-lamp examination and fluorescein staining (100% of panelists). Tear breakup time and medical history were also frequently used (both in 94%). Schirmer test with anesthesia (71%) and without anesthesia (65%) were less frequently used, as well as rose bengal staining (65%). A combination of different tests was typically preferred in an effort to improve the specificity and sensitivity (Table 2).

TABLE 2. Most Commonly Used Diagnostic Tests Reported by Panelists for Evaluating a Patient With Probable Dry Eye

Diagnostic Tests	Respondents Regularly Using Them (%)
Fluorescein staining	100
Tear breakup time	94
Schirmer test	71
Rose bengal staining	65
Corneal topography	41
Impression cytology	24
Tear fluorescein clearance	24
Ocular Surface Disease Index Questionnaire	18
NEIVFQ-25*	6
Tear osmolarity	6
Conjunctival biopsy	6

*NEIVFQ-25: National Eye Institute Vision Function Questionnaire-25.

Classification of Dry Eye Disease

More than one half of the respondents felt that the current classification of aqueous-deficient versus evaporative dry eye failed to incorporate inflammatory mechanisms and drew a sharp distinction between disorders where there is significant overlap.[25,26] Furthermore, the historical distinction between Sjögren keratoconjunctivitis sicca (KCS) as representing an autoimmune disorder as opposed to non-Sjögren KCS failed to reflect the evidence that both conditions may share an underlying immune-mediated inflammation. The majority of experts did not consider this useful for establishing a treatment scheme for the ocular disease (12 of 17). The panelists considered the disease severity and the effect of medications on symptoms and signs as the 2 most relevant factors to consider when selecting the adequate therapy for dry eye (Table 3).

Face-to-Face Meeting

At the face-to-face meeting, panel members made comments on the term "dry eye" classically used to name the disease. On the basis of the known pathophysiology, symptoms, and clinical presentation, all panelists agreed that this term did not necessarily reflect the events occurring in the eye. Specifically, all patients with this condition do not necessarily

TABLE 3. Most Relevant Factors Influencing Treatment Decision Making

Factor Considered	Mean Score (Standard Deviation)
Severity of the disease	1.47 (0.72)
Effect of the treatment	1.79 (0.77)
Etiology of the disease	2.08 (1.07)
Diagnosis of Sjögren's syndrome	2.20 (1.05)
Use of artificial tears	3.07 (1.53)
Costs of treatment	3.80 (1.17)
Access to reimbursement	3.92 (1.10)

0 = most relevant; 5 = least relevant.

suffer from reduced tear volume but rather may have abnormalities of tear film composition that include the presence of proinflammatory cytokines.[25–27] The panelists unanimously recommended dysfunctional tear syndrome (DTS) as a more appropriate term for this disease in future references. This term has been incorporated in the rest of this report in lieu of dry eye disease.

Underlying Pathophysiology and Diagnostic Testing

There was consensus that most cases of DTS have an inflammatory basis that either triggers or maintains the condition. However, panelists also agreed on the difficulty in clearly identifying inflammation in most patients. The panel therefore agreed to subclassify the disease as either DTS with clinically apparent inflammation or DTS without clinically evident inflammation.

After discussion at the meeting, the panelists were in agreement that commonly available clinical diagnostic tests did not correlate with symptoms, should not be used in isolation to establish the diagnosis of DTS, and were of minimal value in the assessment of disease severity.

Creation of Therapeutic Algorithms for DTS

First, the panel recommended that patients with DTS should be classified into 1 of 3 major clinical categories at the time of the initial examination: patients with lid margin disease, patients without lid margin disease, and patients with altered tear distribution and clearance.

The panel agreed that the second group, patients who do not have coexistent lid margin disease, is the most common form of presentation of DTS. Within each of these 3 categories, the panel listed the main subsets or specific disease entities or, in the case of DTS without lid margin disease, the patients were divided by severity (Fig. 1). Second, the panel agreed that the assessment of DTS severity is important to guiding therapy, especially in that subset of DTS patients without lid margin disease. The panel reached consensus that the level of severity should be based primarily on symptoms and clinical signs.

The panel members agreed that diagnostic tests are secondary considerations in determining disease severity. The value of diagnostic tests was considered to be in confirming clinical assessment. Again, many of the available tests were deemed not useful for the diagnosis, staging, or evaluating response to therapy in DTS.

Panelists agreed on 3 particularly relevant symptoms and historical elements to be considered in DTS: ocular discomfort, tear substitute requirements, and visual disturbances. In ocular discomfort, a variety of symptoms including itch, scratch, burn, foreign body sensation, and/or photophobia may be present. Depending on the frequency and impact on the quality of life of these elements, symptoms could be categorized as either mild to moderate or severe. The relevant clinical signs to be considered in the evaluation of DTS patients are summarized in Table 4. The panel suggested evaluating the presence of these clinical features to assign a severity level fluctuating from mild to severe.

To create a categorization of the severity of the disease, a scoring system was proposed. Basically, patients were aggregated into 1 of 4 levels of severity according to the signs and symptoms involved (Table 5). The severity of disease indicated the appropriate range of therapeutic options available for the patient, because the panelists agreed that certain therapies were most appropriately reserved for patients with more severe DTS.

Treatment Algorithm for Patients With Lid Margin Disease

The proposed treatment algorithm for these individuals began with division of patients according to the site (anterior vs. posterior) of the lid pathology (Fig. 2). Anterior lid margin disease is treated with lid hygiene and antibacterial therapy, whereas posterior lid margin disease is treated initially with

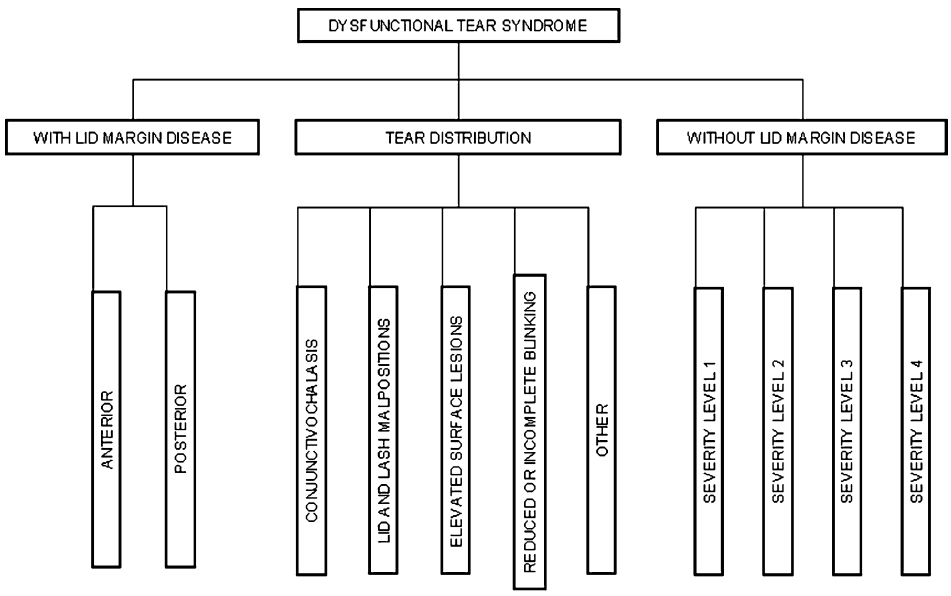

FIGURE 1. Algorithm of the 3 major subsets found in DTS. Each subset should be treated separately, because treatment modality varies according to this separation.

TABLE 4. Clinical Signs in DTS to Consider in Severity Assessment

Lids	Tear Film	Conjunctiva	Cornea	Vision
Telangiectasia	Meniscus	Luster	Punctate changes	Blur
Hyperemia	Foam	Hyperemia	Erosions (micro, macro)	Fluctuations
Scales, crusts	Mucus	Wrinkles	Filaments	
Lash loss or	Debris	Staining	Ulceration	
abnormalities	Oil excess	Symblepharon	Vascularization	
Inspissation		Cicatrization	Scarring	
Meibomian gland disease			Keratinization	
Anatomical abnormalities				

warm massage, with addition of oral tetracyclines and topical corticosteroids, if necessary.

Treatment Algorithm for DTS Patients With Primary Tear Distribution and Clearance Abnormalities

The panel considered that there were patients in whom the even distribution of tears across the ocular surface is impaired, typically related to an anatomic abnormality or to abnormal lid function (Fig. 3). The recommended therapeutic approach to these patients varied in accordance with the specific underlying problem, which is summarized in Figure 3.

Treatment Algorithm for DTS Patients Without Lid Margin Disease

Patients with mild disease are best managed with patient education about the disease and strategies for minimizing its impact, preserved artificial tears, modification as appropriate of systemic medications that might contribute to the condition, and perhaps changes in the home or work environment to alleviate the symptoms (Fig. 4).

In patients in whom the disease state is moderate or severe, the panelists agreed that the more frequent use of tears mandated a switch to unpreserved lubricants, with tears during the day, ointment at night, and consideration of progression to a gel formulation during the day if relief was not adequate with tears. In the absence of signs, the panel recommended lubrication, with frequency determined by the clinical response.

In the presence of signs (eg, moderate corneal staining, filaments), the panel agreed on a stepwise introduction of additional therapies. The panelists noted that patients with DTS may have an inflammatory component, which may or may not be clinically evident. In addition to the use of unpreserved tears, the panel recommended a course of topical corticosteroids and/or cyclosporine A to suppress inflammation.

In patients who fail to respond adequately to lubricants and topical immunomodulators, a course of oral tetracycline therapy was recommended, as well as punctal occlusion with

TABLE 5. Levels of Severity of DTS Without Lid Margin Disease According to Symptoms and Signs

Severity*	Patient Profiles
Level 1	• Mild to moderate symptoms and no signs
	• Mild to moderate conjunctival signs
Level 2	• Moderate to severe symptoms
	• Tear film signs
	• Mild corneal punctate staining
	• Conjunctival staining
	• Visual signs
Level 3	• Severe symptoms
	• Marked corneal punctate staining
	• Central corneal staining
	• Filamentary keratitis
Level 4	• Severe symptoms
	• Severe corneal staining, erosions
	• Conjunctival scarring

*At least one sign and one symptom of each category should be present to qualify for the corresponding level assignment.

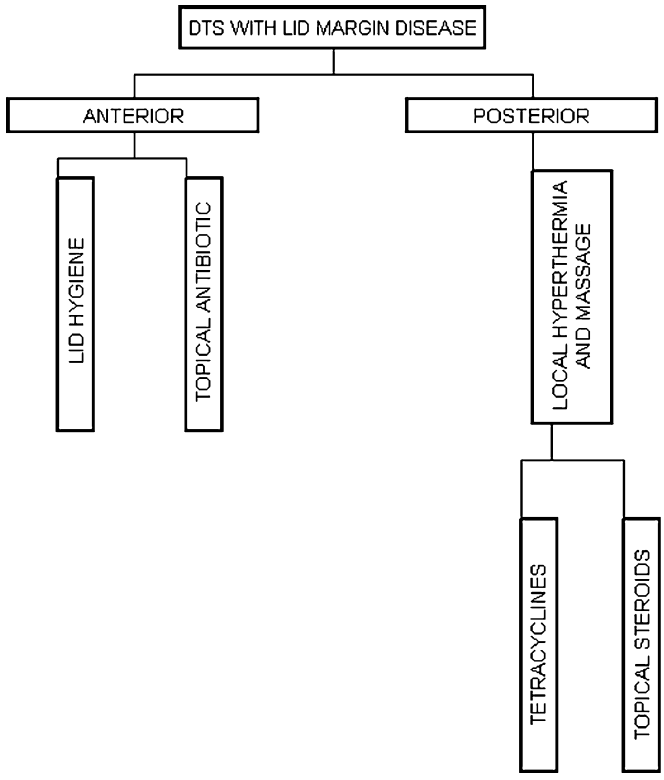

FIGURE 2. Algorithm on treatment recommendations for DTS with lid margin disease.

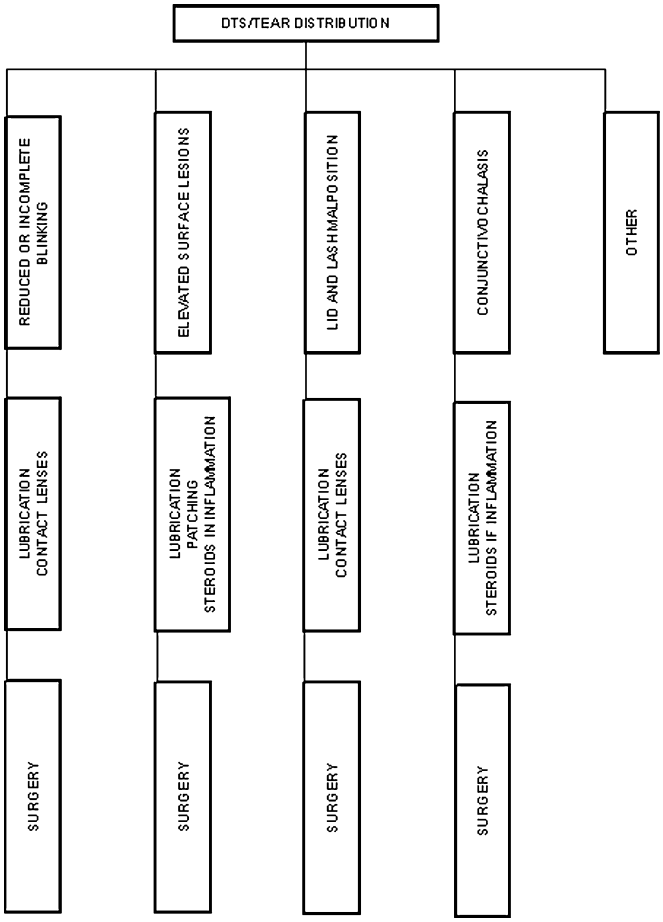

FIGURE 3. Algorithm on treatment recommendations for DTS with abnormal tear distribution.

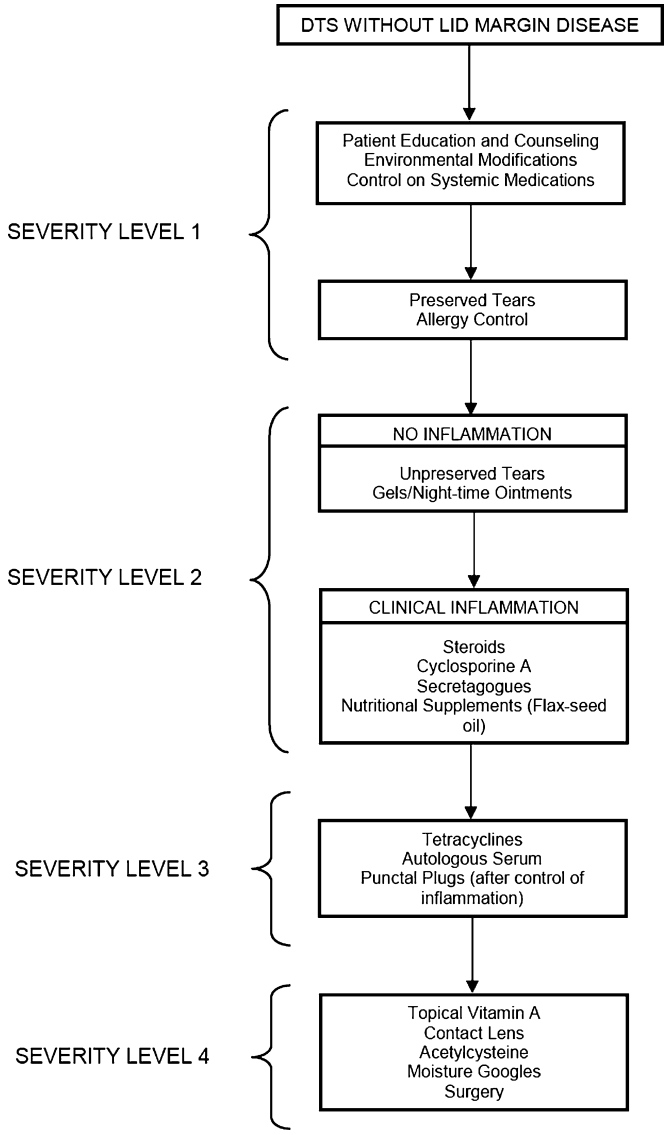

FIGURE 4. Algorithm on treatment recommendations for DTS without lid margin disease according to severity.

plugs. Because of the possible presence of non–clinically apparent inflammation, punctal plugs could result in retention of proinflammatory tear components on the ocular surface and may enhance damage to the ocular surface, accelerate the disease process, and produce greater patient discomfort. Therefore, the panel agreed that it is important to treat the inflammatory condition before blockage of tear drainage with punctal plugs.

Patients with severe disease who are not adequately controlled after the above therapeutic interventions may benefit from more advanced interventions. These would include systemic immunomodulators for the control of severe inflammation, topical acetylcysteine for filament formation caused by mucin accumulation, moisture goggles to reduce tear evaporation, and surgery (including punctal cautery) to reduce tear drainage. Patients with Sjögren syndrome would fit within this category.

DISCUSSION

Some researchers have stressed the use of Delphi panels in clinical research, despite some flaws in terms of reproducibility and other confounding factors that may adversely influence the results.[28,29] Delphi approach is not necessarily "evidence-based": Good evidence may exist contradicting a particular consensus; or conversely, evidence for a particular consensus may be absent, because it has not been adequately studied. Especially for areas where there is little or no good evidence in the literature, the process relies on the opinion of the participating panelists, potentially tapping into collective error.[30] Moreover, consensus is subject to particular interpretation of evidence and personal experience, which may affect reproducibility.[14] Nonetheless, this process has lately become popular to delineate guidelines of treatment of various disorders.[30–33]

Bias of panelists' selection may inevitably occur as a result of the inclusion criteria chosen. It is a common observation that highly published authors tend to have some

form of commercial support from pharmaceutical industry. Nine of 17 panelists disclosed a past or present relationship as a speaker/consultant/research funds recipient from companies having products for the treatment of DTS.

The success of a Delphi panel is based largely on the ability of the facilitator to maintain balanced participation of panelists.[32] One of the major challenges in such panels is to avoid the inadvertent control of one or more leaders over the discussion.[30] The facilitator in our study was a person with previous experience in consensus panels. He had the ability to encourage homogeneous participation of panel members. The facilitator focused on the varied responses previously given by panelists in the survey to avoid discussions over a single topic/therapeutic approach raised by individual participants during the meeting. Inevitable discrepancies were observed during the DTS panel meeting; however, consensual agreement among panelists was finally achieved.

We believe that one significant consequence of the panel meeting was the recommendation for a change from the term dry eye, frequently used to describe the condition, to the term dysfunctional tear syndrome. Panelists unanimously agreed that the label dry eye reflects neither patient symptoms nor necessarily the pathogenic mechanism of the disease. Panel members also agreed that diagnosing patients with dry eye may be misleading to both colleagues and patients. Patients may be confused when excess tearing is their primary complaint and are diagnosed as having dry eye. Even more confusing for patients is their subsequent treatment with anti-inflammatory agents or antibiotics. For these reasons, the term DTS was coined, because the panel felt that this term was sufficiently broad to encompass the myriad of etiologies while still representing a common denominator among them.

There was consensus that severity of disease should be the primary determinant for the therapeutic strategy chosen. In addition, observation of the patient response to initial therapy was deemed as an important indicator of disease severity and further treatment selection. The failure on improvement using medications in one level assigns the patient to additional therapy in the immediate superior severity level. The available diagnostic tests were not considered important in the assessment of disease severity and therefore were not included in the classification. However, this should not underestimate the value of these tests in the diagnosis of DTS, because they were regularly used by panelists to confirm the presence of the disease.

The task of creating guidelines for DTS is complex, because practitioners encountering DTS are faced with a multifactorial disorder with several pathophysiological events that may require a variety of customized therapeutic schemes. Moreover, significant overlapping between the categories selected by the panel is also likely. The summary treatment recommendations (Table 6) relating severity of disease with clinical symptoms and signs created by the panel may serve as a useful guide. It is recognized that individual patient characteristics may require deviation from recommended treatment, but panelists were clear that the ideal therapy for DTS is often achieved with a combination of interventions. Assignment of levels of severity may work only as a stepwise guide to approaching the best combination of medications to avoid symptoms. It is important to stress that patients may present with signs belonging to different categories of DTS (ie, a patient may have DTS with lid margin disease and exhibit tear distribution problems).

TABLE 6. Treatment Recommendations for DTS on the Basis of Level of Severity

DTS Severity	Treatment Recommendations	
Level 1	• No treatment	• Use of hypoallergenic products
	• Preserved tears	• Water intake
	• Environmental management	• Psychological support
	• Allergy drops	• Avoidance of drugs contributing to dry eye
Level 2	• Unpreserved tears	• Secretagogues
	• Gels	• Topical steroids
	• Ointments	• Topical cyclosporine A
	• Nutritional support (flaxseed/fatty acids)	
Level 3	• Tetracyclines	
	• Punctal plugs	
Level 4	• Surgery	• Punctal cautery
	• Systemic anti-inflammatory therapy	• Acetylcysteine
	• Oral cyclosporine	• Contact lenses
	• Moisture goggles	

Those particular patients should be treated according to recommendations for both categories to succeed in controlling their symptoms and signs. Published guidelines in other disease areas have proven useful to general practitioners to approach a complex disease like DTS.[14,15,17] Some examples using the Delphi technique have been reported in esophageal cancer management,[11] systemic hypertension treatment algorithms,[15] and acute diarrhea management in children.[30] In this study, the Delphi approach was used to gain a practical approach to the diagnosis and treatment of DTS, as opposed to an extensive evaluation of available diagnostic methods or pathophysiology mechanisms, already well documented in the literature[34–38] (Table 7).

TABLE 7. Advantages of the Proposed Recommendations by the Delphi Panel

- Proposes a new terminology for dry eye disease (dysfunctional tear syndrome) from recent pathophysiologic findings
- Includes novel therapeutic options in the market
- Provides simplified therapeutic recommendations in a stepwise approach
- Patients without lid margin disease/tear distribution problems are assigned to 4 severity levels
- Severity levels are categorized according to patient's signs and symptoms, not tests
- Therapeutic options are oriented by severity levels
- Easier approach for general eye care practitioners

All guidelines are limited by the future development of new treatments and by new insights that future research will bring. We therefore regard these guidelines as a platform onto which future updates may be added.

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