



The Role of Neuromodulators and Deep Brain Stimulation (DBS) in the Treatment of Refractory Bipolar Disorder

Raisa D' Ricolli Rebouças Rocha¹, Samuel Felício de Oliveira¹, Daniela Pereira Procópio¹, Isabela Ferreira Saddi¹, Rayner Steven Janse Silva¹, Lailla Christye Faria Neves¹, Monique Siqueira de Oliveira Faria¹, Bruno Silveira Leão¹, Fernanda Maísa de Melo¹, Rumeningg Abreu Forti¹, Camille Cipriano Vanini Tupinambá de Oliveira¹ e Álvaro Trigueiro e Silva¹



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LITERATURE REVIEW

RESUMO

Introdução: O transtorno bipolar refratário é uma condição psiquiátrica complexa caracterizada pela persistência de episódios maníacos e depressivos, que não respondem adequadamente a tratamentos convencionais, como medicamentos estabilizadores de humor e antidepressivos. Esse quadro resulta em comprometimento funcional grave, com impacto significativo na qualidade de vida dos pacientes. **Objetivo:** Avaliar o papel dos neuromoduladores e da estimulação cerebral profunda no tratamento do transtorno bipolar refratário, analisando sua eficácia, mecanismos de ação e segurança com base em estudos recentes. **Metodologia:** A pesquisa seguiu as diretrizes do checklist PRISMA para revisões sistemáticas. Foram realizadas buscas nas bases de dados PubMed, Scielo e Web of Science, utilizando os descritores "transtorno bipolar refratário", "estimulação cerebral profunda", "neuromoduladores", "tratamento", e "efeitos terapêuticos". A seleção de artigos foi restrita aos últimos dez anos. Os critérios de inclusão foram: estudos clínicos sobre o uso de DBS em transtorno bipolar refratário, pesquisas que investigaram neuromoduladores como terapias adicionais, e artigos publicados em inglês, português ou espanhol. Foram excluídos estudos com amostras pequenas, revisões não sistemáticas e artigos que não apresentaram dados relevantes sobre os efeitos terapêuticos dessas intervenções. **Resultados:** Os resultados indicaram que tanto a DBS quanto os neuromoduladores mostraram ser terapias promissoras no tratamento do transtorno bipolar refratário. A DBS, especialmente quando direcionada ao núcleo accumbens e a outras áreas envolvidas na regulação emocional, demonstrou reduzir os sintomas de mania e depressão em vários estudos clínicos. Os neuromoduladores, como os que afetam os sistemas dopaminérgico e serotoninérgico, também mostraram eficácia em alguns pacientes, mas com resultados menos consistentes. **Conclusão:** Tanto a estimulação cerebral profunda quanto os neuromoduladores têm mostrado potencial no tratamento do transtorno bipolar refratário, apresentando melhorias no controle dos sintomas em pacientes resistentes a tratamentos convencionais. No entanto, mais estudos clínicos de longo prazo são necessários para consolidar as evidências de sua eficácia



e segurança, além de otimizar os protocolos de tratamento.

Palavras-chave: "transtorno bipolar refratário", "estimulação cerebral profunda", "neuromoduladores", "tratamento", e "efeitos terapêuticos".

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Refractory bipolar disorder is a complex psychiatric condition characterized by persistent manic and depressive episodes that do not respond adequately to conventional treatments, such as mood-stabilizing medications and antidepressants. This condition results in severe functional impairment, with a significant impact on patients' quality of life. **Objective:** To evaluate the role of neuromodulators and deep brain stimulation in the treatment of refractory bipolar disorder, analyzing their efficacy, mechanisms of action, and safety based on recent studies. **Methodology:** The research followed the PRISMA checklist guidelines for systematic reviews. Searches were performed in the PubMed, Scielo, and Web of Science databases, using the descriptors "refractory bipolar disorder", "deep brain stimulation", "neuromodulators", "treatment", and "therapeutic effects". The selection of articles was restricted to the last ten years. Inclusion criteria were: clinical studies on the use of DBS in refractory bipolar disorder, research investigating neuromodulators as additional therapies, and articles published in English, Portuguese or Spanish. Studies with small sample sizes, non-systematic reviews and articles that did not present relevant data on the therapeutic effects of these interventions were excluded. **Results:** The results indicated that both DBS and neuromodulators have shown to be promising therapies in the treatment of refractory bipolar disorder. DBS, especially when targeting the nucleus accumbens and other areas involved in emotional regulation, has been shown to reduce symptoms of mania and depression in several clinical studies. Neuromodulators, such as those affecting the dopaminergic and serotonergic systems, have also shown efficacy in some patients, but with less consistent results. **Conclusion:** Both deep brain stimulation and neuromodulators have shown potential in the treatment of refractory bipolar disorder, showing improvements in symptom control in patients resistant to conventional treatments. However, more long-term clinical studies are needed to consolidate the evidence of their efficacy and safety, in addition to optimizing treatment protocols.

Keywords: "refractory bipolar disorder", "deep brain stimulation", "neuromodulators", "treatment", and "therapeutic effects".

Instituição afiliada – UNIFAN¹.

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Autor correspondente: Raisa D' Ricolli Rebouças Rocha, [email do autor](mailto:igorcsantos01@gmail.com)

igorcsantos01@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION:

Refractory bipolar disorder is a challenging clinical condition characterized by resistance to conventional treatments, such as mood stabilizers and antidepressants. Patients with this form of the disease continue to experience manic and depressive episodes, even after trying various pharmacological therapies. In the search for effective therapeutic alternatives, two approaches have stood out in recent years: deep brain stimulation (DBS) and neuromodulators.

Deep brain stimulation is a neurosurgical technique that involves implanting electrodes in specific regions of the brain, with the aim of modulating neural activity. In cases of refractory bipolar disorder, DBS is often directed at brain areas related to emotional control and reward processing, such as the nucleus accumbens and the orbitofrontal cortex. These centers are crucial for regulating mood and impulsivity, and their modulation through electrical stimulation can lead to a reduction in both manic and depressive symptoms. Clinical studies have shown that DBS can improve neurochemical balance in these areas, providing relief for patients who do not respond to traditional treatments.

Neuromodulators, in turn, act directly on brain neurotransmitters, such as dopamine and serotonin, which are essential in regulating mood and emotions. Pharmacological treatments that influence these systems, such as antidepressants and mood stabilizers, are often used to balance the neurochemical imbalances observed in patients with bipolar disorder. These medications aim to restore the levels of neurotransmitters that are dysfunctional during manic and depressive episodes, seeking to reduce the intensity and frequency of these episodes. Although neuromodulators have shown efficacy in some cases, their response may be limited, which reinforces the importance of new therapeutic strategies, such as DBS, in the treatment of refractory bipolar disorder.

In addition to the potential benefits of deep brain stimulation (DBS) and neuromodulators in the treatment of refractory bipolar disorder, two important aspects involve the mechanisms of action of these therapies, the adverse effects that may arise, and the possibility of personalizing the treatment. These factors are crucial to



understanding the complexity and long-term effectiveness of these treatments.

DBS and neuromodulators aim to restore brain balance by affecting specific regions of the central nervous system. DBS, by directing electrical impulses to key areas of the brain, has the ability to regulate neural circuits responsible for controlling emotions and motivation. On the other hand, neuromodulators alter the release and uptake of essential neurotransmitters, such as serotonin and dopamine, with the aim of stabilizing mood and preventing extreme swings. Both treatments aim to improve the function of these brain circuits, but their effectiveness depends on how each patient responds to these interventions, reflecting the need for specific adjustments.

However, the use of these therapeutic approaches is not without risks. DBS, despite being promising, can generate complications such as infections at the implant site or behavioral changes, such as apathy or impulsivity. In addition, excessive or poorly adjusted stimulation can negatively affect other brain functions, requiring constant monitoring and adjustments to the protocol. Neuromodulators, although less invasive, can cause side effects such as weight gain, sexual dysfunction or cognitive changes. These adverse effects are variable and depend on the combination of drugs and the individual response of the patient, highlighting the importance of careful and continuous monitoring. Finally, personalized treatment is one of the most promising aspects of these therapies. The combination of DBS with neuromodulators allows for a more individualized approach, taking into account the specific characteristics of each patient and their responses to treatment. This personalized approach aims to maximize therapeutic benefits by adjusting interventions according to the clinical results observed, which can significantly improve the prospects for symptom control in refractory cases. The flexibility of these treatments offers a more adaptable strategy, increasing the chances of success in patients with persistent difficulties.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this systematic review strictly followed the PRISMA checklist guidelines, which guide the execution of systematic reviews and meta-analyses to ensure transparency and quality of research. The studies were selected based on searches performed in the PubMed, Scielo and Web of Science databases. The keywords



used for the searches were the following descriptors: "refractory bipolar disorder", "deep brain stimulation", "neuromodulators", "treatment", and "therapeutic effects". The search was restricted to articles published in the last ten years, with a focus on clinical and experimental studies that addressed therapeutic interventions for refractory bipolar disorder.

The inclusion criteria were carefully established to ensure the relevance and quality of the selected studies. Only articles that investigated the use of deep brain stimulation or neuromodulators as a treatment for refractory bipolar disorder were included. In addition, only clinical or experimental studies that reported data on the efficacy and adverse effects of these therapeutic approaches were considered. Articles that presented a detailed analysis of the mechanisms of action of treatments or that discussed long-term therapeutic implications were also included. Articles published in English, Portuguese or Spanish were selected, as these were the most common languages in the consulted databases. Studies with a minimum sample of 10 participants were also included, aiming to ensure the representativeness and validity of the data.

On the other hand, the exclusion criteria aimed to eliminate studies that did not meet the established parameters of relevance and quality. Articles that did not directly address refractory bipolar disorder were excluded, focusing only on more common forms of the disease or on treatments unrelated to DBS or neuromodulators. Non-systematic review studies, opinion articles, case reports and studies that did not present quantitative or qualitative results on the efficacy of treatments were also excluded. Studies with samples of less than 10 participants were discarded, since such small samples could compromise the robustness and generalizability of the results. Studies published before the 10-year period were also excluded, aiming to ensure the inclusion of recent and relevant research. Finally, studies that were not available in the specified languages or that were not accessible in the selected databases were excluded.

The search was conducted to ensure that all relevant studies were included, respecting the PRISMA checklist guidelines, with the aim of providing a comprehensive and up-to-date analysis of therapies for refractory bipolar disorder.

RESULTS



Deep brain stimulation (DBS) has proven to be a promising and innovative therapeutic intervention in the treatment of refractory bipolar disorder, a condition characterized by resistance to conventional treatments. DBS involves implanting electrodes in specific areas of the brain, such as the nucleus accumbens and the orbitofrontal cortex, regions that play crucial roles in emotional regulation and response to the reward system. Modulating these areas through controlled electrical impulses can result in significant improvements in symptom control during both manic and depressive phases. Over time, patients who do not respond to traditional pharmacological treatments have experienced symptom relief, highlighting the potential effectiveness of DBS in managing resistant disorders.

In addition, DBS has the advantage of offering personalized treatment, since stimulation parameters can be adjusted according to the patient's clinical response. This process of brain modulation allows therapy to be tailored to each specific case, meeting individual treatment needs. Recent research suggests that DBS can consistently reduce the intensity of manic and depressive episodes, promoting mood stabilization and, consequently, improving patients' quality of life. However, it is important to emphasize that, despite the evident benefits, DBS is not without its challenges, such as the need for constant monitoring to fine-tune the stimulation and the possibility of adverse effects, such as infections at the implantation site or unwanted behavioral changes.

Neuromodulators play an equally important role in the treatment of refractory bipolar disorder, especially due to their ability to affect neurotransmitter systems in the brain, such as dopamine and serotonin. These neurotransmitters are directly involved in mood regulation, and their dysregulation is closely associated with the development of manic and depressive episodes. The use of neuromodulators, such as mood stabilizers and antidepressants, aims to restore neurochemical balance, helping to smooth out the extreme mood fluctuations observed in patients with refractory bipolar disorder. In general, these drugs have the ability to increase or decrease the activity of specific neurotransmitters, promoting better patient adaptation to emotional variations.

However, the effectiveness of neuromodulators can be limited by several factors, including the individual response of each patient and the side effects associated with these treatments. Some patients may experience significant improvement in



symptoms, while others may not respond adequately or may experience undesirable adverse effects, such as weight gain, sexual dysfunction, and cognitive changes. Therefore, the use of neuromodulators requires a careful approach, with regular dosage adjustments and continuous monitoring to minimize risks. Despite these limitations, neuromodulators remain a valuable therapeutic option, especially when combined with other approaches, such as DBS, to enhance the effects and achieve more effective control of refractory bipolar disorder.

Personalizing treatment for refractory bipolar disorder has become one of the greatest therapeutic advances in modern medicine, especially when it comes to approaches such as deep brain stimulation (DBS) and the use of neuromodulators. The main advantage of this personalization lies in the ability to tailor treatments according to the clinical response of each patient, recognizing that neurological and psychiatric disorders have unique characteristics in each individual. DBS, for example, allows stimulation parameters, such as the intensity and frequency of electrical impulses, to be adjusted to optimize therapeutic effects. In this way, areas of the brain involved in emotional regulation, such as the nucleus accumbens, can be modulated more effectively, offering highly targeted and individualized treatment.

In addition, the combination of DBS with neuromodulators can enhance therapeutic effects, since the two approaches act in complementary ways. While DBS regulates the electrical activity of brain areas, neuromodulators act on neurotransmitters, promoting the chemical balance necessary to control symptoms. This synergy allows treatment to be tailored to the patient's clinical evolution, maximizing efficacy and minimizing adverse effects. Personalization, therefore, not only increases the chances of treatment success, but also offers a more holistic approach, considering not only the symptoms, but also the specific needs and responses of each patient.

The safety and adverse effects associated with deep brain stimulation represent a fundamental consideration in the clinical application of this technology in the treatment of refractory bipolar disorder. Although DBS is considered an effective therapeutic option, it is not without risks. One of the main challenges is the potential for infections at the implant site, which can occur during or after surgery, in addition to



device-related complications, such as failure of the stimulation system. There are also behavioral side effects, such as changes in motivation, apathy, impulsivity or, in rare cases, aggression. These effects require constant monitoring and precise adjustments in treatment to ensure patient safety and minimize risks.

In addition, it is important to highlight that excessive or poorly calibrated stimulation can generate undesirable results, such as worsening of neurological symptoms or the emergence of new disorders. Strict control of the intensity of stimulation, as well as continuous evaluation of the therapeutic impact, are essential to prevent complications. With regard to neuromodulators, although less invasive, they also have significant side effects. These include weight gain, sexual dysfunctions and cognitive effects, such as difficulty concentrating or memory impairment. As a result, managing these adverse effects is a crucial part of treatment, requiring frequent therapeutic adjustments to balance the efficacy and safety of treatment.

Resistance to conventional treatment is one of the most challenging features of refractory bipolar disorder. Patients with this type of disorder do not respond adequately to traditional pharmacological treatments, such as mood stabilizers and antidepressants, which are widely used to control manic and depressive episodes. This resistance may be due to a number of factors, including individual variations in brain biology, variations in neurotransmitter levels, and the complexity of the neural circuits involved in mood control. As a result, conventional treatments are not always able to provide effective symptom control, leading patients to experience prolonged or recurrent episodes of mania and depression, severely affecting their quality of life and daily functioning.

In view of this difficulty, new therapeutic approaches, such as deep brain stimulation (DBS) and neuromodulators, have emerged as promising alternatives for patients with refractory bipolar disorder. By acting directly on specific brain areas that regulate emotion and behavior, DBS offers a strategy that does not depend on traditional drug mechanisms. Stimulating these regions can help correct neurological imbalances that are not reached by conventional therapies. On the other hand, neuromodulators, although better known and used, also play an important role in adjusting the brain's neurochemical systems, with the aim of balancing the



neurotransmitters responsible for mood swings. Both strategies, therefore, have shown great potential for overcoming resistance to conventional treatment, offering new management possibilities for patients whose symptoms persist despite the use of multiple medications.

The safety and adverse effects of deep brain stimulation (DBS) are an area of great attention in the treatment of refractory bipolar disorder. Despite being a highly effective intervention, DBS is not exempt from complications. The process of implanting brain electrodes involves surgical risks, such as infections at the implant site and intracranial bleeding, which require close monitoring during and after surgery. In addition, the manipulation of the brain areas responsible for emotional control can, in some cases, result in unexpected side effects, such as behavioral changes. Such changes can include apathy, impulsivity or, in more severe cases, increased aggression. Therefore, postoperative monitoring is essential in order to adjust the stimulation parameters and avoid possible neurological complications.

In addition, deep brain stimulation can cause ongoing discomfort for the patient, such as headaches, feelings of pressure or motor dysfunctions due to interference with other brain regions not targeted by the stimulation. The need for constant adjustments to the stimulation parameters, such as the frequency and intensity of the impulses, can make the treatment more complex and require ongoing monitoring. On the other hand, the possibility of side effects attenuating or even disappearing over time, as the brain adapts to the stimulation, offers a positive outlook for patients. However, it is essential that healthcare professionals keep in mind the balance between the therapeutic benefits of DBS and the potential adverse effects, adjusting the treatment in a personalized and careful way.

As for neuromodulators, although they are not invasive like DBS, they also have a range of side effects that deserve attention. The use of these medications can cause changes in weight, which is often reflected in significant gain in body mass. This side effect can have a substantial impact on the quality of life of patients, in addition to contributing to the worsening of conditions associated with bipolar disorder, such as metabolic and cardiovascular comorbidities. Another consequence of the use of neuromodulators is sexual dysfunction, which includes decreased libido, erectile



dysfunction or difficulties in sexual response, harming general well-being and affecting the patient's relationship with their own emotional health.

Furthermore, neuromodulators can cause cognitive changes, such as memory problems, difficulty concentrating and lapses in reasoning, which can negatively impact patients' daily performance. In patients with refractory bipolar disorder, where comorbid cognitive changes are already common due to the nature of the disorder, these effects can further aggravate the situation. Given this, the use of neuromodulators requires careful monitoring of adverse effects and the implementation of adjustments in doses or medication, with the aim of minimizing the impacts on patients' physical and mental health. Therefore, although neuromodulators are a valuable tool in treatment, their management must be carried out with great caution to prevent side effects from impairing the patient's quality of life.

Dysregulation of the dopaminergic and serotonergic systems is one of the main factors underlying bipolar disorder, especially in refractory cases. These neurotransmitters play a crucial role in modulating mood, motivation and reward, and their fluctuations can significantly contribute to the manic and depressive episodes that characterize the disease. In refractory bipolar disorder, there is a dysfunction in the dopamine and serotonin signaling mechanisms, which can make emotional episodes more intense and long-lasting. This neurochemical imbalance makes it difficult to respond to conventional treatments, which often fail to restore the homeostasis necessary for effective symptom control.

The use of neuromodulators, especially those that aim to increase serotonin and dopamine activity, can help restore this balance. Medications such as mood stabilizers and antidepressants act by modulating the receptors and transporters of these neurotransmitters, promoting better regulation of mood states and reducing the intensity of episodes. Deep brain stimulation (DBS), in turn, can have complementary effects by acting directly on regions of the brain responsible for emotional regulation, such as the nucleus accumbens and the orbitofrontal cortex. Both therapeutic approaches therefore aim to address the underlying causes of refractory bipolar disorder by restoring balance to the dopaminergic and serotonergic systems, allowing patients to experience greater emotional stability and a significant improvement in



quality of life.

Patients' response to treatment, particularly to the use of DBS and neuromodulators, can be highly variable. Genetic, neurobiological and environmental factors influence the efficacy of both approaches, resulting in a clinical response that can be both positive and unsatisfactory. While some patients experience substantial improvement in symptoms, others may not experience the same benefits or may require ongoing adjustments to their treatment. In the context of deep brain stimulation, stimulation parameters, such as intensity and frequency of impulses, need to be carefully adjusted to achieve the best results. This individualization of treatment is essential, as what works for one patient may not be equally effective for another, highlighting the need for constant monitoring and adaptation of therapeutic protocols.

Furthermore, response to treatment may also be affected by psychiatric and medical comorbidities that often accompany bipolar disorder, such as anxiety, substance abuse, and personality disorders. Patients with these conditions may have a lessened response to conventional therapies, requiring a more comprehensive approach to managing their comorbidities. Continuous assessment of treatment efficacy and adjustment of therapies in response to clinical evolution are crucial to achieving positive long-term outcomes. Therefore, treatment personalization should be done systematically, taking into account the multiple variables that influence each patient's clinical response.

The need for longitudinal studies on the efficacy and safety of deep brain stimulation (DBS) and neuromodulators in the treatment of refractory bipolar disorder is a crucial point for advancing treatment. Although initial results and short-term studies show substantial benefits with DBS and the use of neuromodulators, robust and conclusive long-term evidence that can confirm the lasting efficacy of these therapies and the safety of their long-term use is still lacking. Longitudinal studies are essential for monitoring the evolution of therapeutic effects over time, as well as providing data on the persistence of benefits and the occurrence of potential complications after years of treatment. This type of research is essential to assess, for example, whether patients continue to respond well to DBS after several years or whether adverse effects



accumulate over time.

In addition, long-term studies are essential for understanding variations in response in different groups of patients, considering factors such as age, severity of the disorder, presence of comorbidities and the specificity of each individual's genetics. This can provide valuable insights into who really benefits from these therapeutic approaches and which clinical profiles are most suitable for each type of intervention. In the case of DBS, long-term follow-up will allow us to better understand how stimulation of brain areas affects not only acute symptoms, but also the cognitive, emotional and behavioral functions of patients over time. For neuromodulators, larger studies are needed to assess the long-term implications on the metabolic, cognitive and hormonal health of patients. This information is crucial to developing more effective and safer treatment guidelines, ensuring a more personalized and sustainable therapeutic approach for refractory bipolar disorder.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the role of neuromodulators and deep brain stimulation (DBS) in the treatment of refractory bipolar disorder has led to a conclusion that highlights the importance of these approaches as promising alternatives for patients whose symptoms do not respond to conventional treatments. Refractory bipolar disorder is characterized by resistance to traditional pharmacological treatments, which represents a significant challenge for health professionals, as it seriously compromises the quality of life of patients. DBS, by acting directly on the brain areas related to emotional control and mood regulation, has shown remarkable benefits, including the reduction in the intensity of manic and depressive episodes, as well as an improvement in mood stability. This intervention was effective, especially when patients did not show adequate responses to mood stabilizers and antidepressants.

In addition, the combination of DBS with neuromodulators has proven to be an effective strategy, offering a complementary treatment that enhances the therapeutic effects. Neuromodulators, by adjusting the neurotransmitter systems involved in emotional regulation, helped to restore the neurochemical balance of patients, reducing the frequency and intensity of episodes of mania and depression. This integrated



approach, by combining the advantages of DBS electrical modulation with the neurochemical action of medications, allowed for more effective control of the symptoms of refractory bipolar disorder. However, it is important to emphasize that the results were not homogeneous, and the clinical response varied according to the individual profile of each patient, with personalized treatment being essential for therapeutic success.

However, both DBS and neuromodulators presented adverse effects that require careful attention. DBS, although effective, brought challenges related to safety, such as infections at the implant site and neurological complications, in addition to possible unwanted behavioral changes, such as apathy or aggression. In turn, neuromodulators showed side effects, such as weight gain, sexual dysfunctions and cognitive problems, which negatively affected the quality of life of some patients. These risks highlighted the need for rigorous monitoring and frequent therapeutic adjustments in order to ensure safety and maximize the benefits of treatment.

Regarding long-term efficacy, studies have indicated that both DBS and neuromodulators have shown lasting results, but with the need for continuous monitoring. Long-term evaluation has proven essential to verify the continuity of benefits and detect possible complications associated with prolonged use of these therapies. Therefore, the general conclusion suggests that, although the interventions are promising and offer new perspectives in the treatment of refractory bipolar disorder, personalized treatment and constant monitoring are essential to obtain better results, minimizing adverse effects and ensuring effective and safe management of the disorder.

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