RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cost-effectiveness of oral versus intravenous antibiotics (OVIVA) in patients with bone and joint infection: evidence from a non-inferiority trial [version 1; peer review: 1 approved with reservations]

Nicola McMeekin, Claudia Geue, Andrew Briggs, Ines Rombach, Ho Kwong Li, Philip Bejon, Martin McNally, Bridget L. Atkins, Jamie Ferguson, Matthew Scarborough, OVIVA collaborators

Abstract

Background: Bone and joint infections are becoming increasingly common and are usually treated with surgery and a course of intravenous antibiotics. However, there is no evidence to support the superiority of intravenous therapy and there is a growing body of literature showing that oral therapy is effective in treating these infections. Given this lack of evidence the clinical trial ‘Oral Versus Intravenous Antibiotics’ (OVIVA) was designed to assess the clinical and cost-effectiveness of intravenous versus oral antibiotics for the treatment of bone and joint infections, using a non-inferiority design. Clinical results from the trial indicate that oral antibiotics are non-inferior to intravenous antibiotics. The aim of this paper is to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of intravenous compared to oral antibiotics for treating bone and joint infections, using data from OVIVA.

Methods: A cost-utility analysis was carried out, the main economic outcome measure was the quality adjusted life-year, measured using the EQ-5D-3L questionnaire, combined with costs to estimate cost-effectiveness over 12-months follow-up.

Results: Results show that costs were significantly lower in the oral arm compared to the intravenous arm, a difference of £2,740 (95% confidence interval £1,488 to £3,992). Results of four sensitivity analyses were consistent with the base-case results. QALYs were marginally higher in the oral arm, however this difference was not statistically significant; -0.007 (95% confidence interval -0.045 to 0.031).

Conclusions: Treating patients with bone and joint infections for the first six weeks of therapy with oral antibiotics is both less costly and does not
six weeks of therapy with oral antibiotics is both less costly and does not result in detectable differences in quality of life compared to treatment with intravenous antibiotics. Adopting a practice of treating bone and joint infections with oral antibiotics early in the course of therapy could potentially save the UK National Health Service over £17 million annually.

**Keywords**
antibiotics, oral, intravenous, cost-effectiveness, non-inferiority, economic evaluation

Corresponding author: Nicola McMeekin (nicola.mcmeekin@glasgow.ac.uk)

**Author roles:** McMeekin N: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft Preparation; Geue C: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft Preparation; Briggs A: Conceptualization, Funding Acquisition, Methodology, Writing – Review & Editing; Rombach I: Writing – Review & Editing; Li HK: Writing – Review & Editing; Bejon P: Funding Acquisition, Writing – Review & Editing; McNally M: Funding Acquisition, Investigation, Writing – Review & Editing; Atkins BL: Writing – Review & Editing; Ferguson J: Writing – Review & Editing; Scarborough M: Funding Acquisition, Writing – Review & Editing;

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Introduction

Bone and joint infections are becoming increasingly common. In the UK, the National Health Service (NHS) conducts around 190,000 hip and knee replacement surgeries annually; of these, approximately 1% will result in post-operative infection3. In addition, there are around 70,000 neck of femur fractures, surgery for which is associated with post-operative infection in up to 2.5% of cases, and 20,000 metalware or fracture-fixations with around 15% infection rate (Personal communication, Dr M. Scarborough). There are also approximately 5,000 diabetic foot infections and a smaller number of infections of the axial skeleton annually. Treatment for these infections is estimated to cost around £20,000 to £40,000 per patient3.

These infections are usually treated with surgery and an initial course of intravenous antibiotics for 4–6 weeks. However, there is no evidence to support the superiority of intravenous therapy and, in recent years, there has been a growing body of literature showing that oral therapy is effective in treating these infections. A Cochrane review in 20134 found there was no benefit of intravenous compared to oral antibiotics in treating bone and joint infection. The authors judged the trials to be of moderate to high risk of bias and there was no statistically significant difference in the pooled results. Furthermore, most of the trials were conducted over 20 years ago, when there was a lower prevalence of bone and joint infections. The authors concluded that there was insufficient evidence from this review to inform a change in practice and there was a need for a randomised controlled trial to investigate this further.

Intravenous treatment requires an access device to administer the antibiotic which carries risk of infection and thromboembolic disease. Oral antibiotics do not carry these risks, are less costly and more convenient. However, oral antibiotics have a higher risk of non-adherence and gastro-intestinal intolerance5.

Given the lack of evidence on the superiority of intravenous compared to oral antibiotics, the clinical trial “OVIVA” was designed to assess the treatment failure rate and cost-effectiveness of intravenous versus oral antibiotics for the first six weeks treatment of bone and joint infections. The study directly tested the different antibiotic administration routes via a non-inferiority design set with a margin of 7.5 percentage points above the upper 90% confidence interval around the risk difference. Clinical results from the trial indicate that oral antibiotics are non-inferior to intravenous antibiotics. The primary clinical outcome of treatment failure (infection present) occurred in 74 of 506 participants (14.6%) in the intravenous arm and in 67 of 509 participants (13.2%) in the oral arm6.

This paper reports on the within-trial cost-effectiveness of OVIVA, estimating cost and quality-adjusted life year (QALY) differentials comparing intravenous antibiotics to oral antibiotics for the first six weeks of treatment of bone and joint infections.

Methods

Overview of analysis

OVIVA was a UK based multi-centre, open-label, randomised, controlled non-inferiority trial with 12 months follow-up. Participants were adults (18+ years) who, in the attending clinician’s opinion, would normally be treated with a 6 weeks course of intravenous antibiotics for bone or joint infection. Participants started their randomised treatment within 7 days of surgery, or if no surgery for treatment of bone and joint infection, within 7 days of starting antibiotics. Participants were randomised to either intravenous or oral antibiotics for the first 6 weeks of therapy. In the intravenous arm, where it was common practice for adjunctive oral agents to be used alongside intravenous agents this was allowed. In the oral arm, if intravenous antibiotic treatment was needed for an unrelated illness, this was allowed for up to five days. Follow-on antibiotic treatment using either route of administration was allowed in both arms. Participants were recruited between June 2010 and October 2015. The primary endpoint was definite failure of infection treatment (infection present) within 12 months of randomisation. Treatment failure was identified locally by the treating clinician and categorised by a blinded end-point committee as: definite, probable and possible. The non-inferiority margin was set at 7.5%, and non-inferiority was met if the upper limit of the 90% CI around the absolute risk difference between the arms fell below this margin. Mortality was not necessarily considered a treatment failure in the absence of meeting criteria for a primary endpoint and was included in the secondary endpoint of ‘serious adverse events’. Full methodological details of the trial are available in the published protocol7.

Individual patient data from the OVIVA trial were used to perform the cost-effectiveness analysis. Outcomes were measured in terms of QALYs. The analysis had a time horizon of 12 months and an NHS and personal social services perspective, reported in GBP sterling (2015 GBP). No discounting was needed due to the short time horizon. Best practice guidance was followed for conducting and reporting the analysis8. Cost-effectiveness was judged using incremental costs per health outcome measured against the current NICE threshold of £20,000 to £30,000. Missing resource and quality of life data was imputed using multiple imputation by chained equation9 for the base case analysis and sensitivity analyses included a complete case analysis to explore the effect of excluding participants with missing data on the final results. Analysis was carried out in Stata 14.0 (StataCorp, College Station, TX, USA).

Resource use

Resource use data were collected using self-reported questionnaires completed at 42, 120- and 365-days post randomisation. Resource use groups comprised: antibiotic medication, intravenous administration and inpatient stays. Antibiotic resource use included all antibiotics prescribed to each participant in the 12-month follow-up period. Inpatient stays were measured in bed days and intravenous administration included the cost of intravenous line insertion and removal for each intravenous episode per participant, cost of line complications where a new line is needed, and the cost of the Outpatient Parenteral Antimicrobial Therapy (OPAT) team if applicable.

Unit costs for antibiotic medication were obtained from the British National Formulary10. Inpatient stays were valued using NHS reference costs11 and intravenous administration resources
and costs were taken from the literature and expert opinion (Personal communication, Dr M. Scarborough). Costs were adjusted for inflation using the Hospital and Community Health Index. Unit costs and their sources are presented in Table 1.

Total costs per participant were calculated by assigning unit costs to within trial resource use for each participant.

Health outcomes
The economic outcome was the QALY, a measure combining both quality and length of life. Quality of life data were collected using the EQ-5D-3L questionnaire, administered at baseline, 14 days, 42 days, 120 days, 365 days. EQ-5D-3L responses were valued using a UK tariff. Standard area-under-the-curve methods were used to calculate QALYs, which were adjusted for baseline utility.

Missing data
Excluding participants with missing data can lead to loss of power and biased results because of a reduced sample size. Because of this, the nature of the missing data was analysed and an appropriate method to replace missing data utilised. Base-case data had missing resource and quality of life data; these missing data were imputed using multiple imputation by chained equation (MICE), which assumes data are missing at random. The effect of missing data was explored using both mean and multiple imputation. Missing cost values were imputed at the aggregate total cost level and missing quality of life data were replaced at utility score level at each EQ-5D-3L follow-up point using multiple imputation.

The regression analyses used to impute missing data included the same explanatory variables used in the missing data imputation in the clinical analysis.

Assumptions
The following additional assumptions were made:
- As intervention resource use was not separately identified we have treated all resource use in the first 6-week period after randomisation as intervention resource use.
- The cost of a line insertion and removal was applied to the initial 6-week period of the intervention. In addition, it was assumed that an intravenous episode with a gap of two days or less between intravenous drugs did not require a new line to be inserted and a cost was not applied for insertion/removal. If the gap between episodes was greater than two days, it was assumed that a new line had to be inserted and the old line was removed, and a cost was assigned accordingly.
- The OPAT type recorded at the 42-day follow-up visit was used for each participant for all intravenous episodes in the 12-month follow-up period.
- Durations of antibiotics, intravenous episodes and inpatient stays per participant were truncated at 365 days.
- OPAT costs were applied at one hour per day when applicable.
- Where participants had an OPAT type of ‘inpatient’ and their intravenous episode extended beyond the inpatient stay, a weighted average cost of 2/5 Self-Administering and 3/5 District Nurse was applied to the length of intravenous episode following discharge from hospital, this was the proportion of District Nurse to self-administering OPAT witnessed in the trial. The same weighted average was applied to participants with missing OPAT type.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Unit cost</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antibiotic</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>British National Formulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inpatient stay</td>
<td>£295.80/overnight stay</td>
<td>NHS reference costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intravenous administration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insertion: PICC</td>
<td>£190</td>
<td>Expert opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Removal</td>
<td>£34.00</td>
<td>Expert opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPAT type</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District nurse</td>
<td>£58 per hour</td>
<td>NHS reference costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inpatient (Hospital infusion centre)</td>
<td>£109 per hour</td>
<td>NHS reference costs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only 6 patients were reported to have a Hickman line inserted and the majority of patients had a PICC line. To be consistent within the IV arm, we assumed a constant cost for a PICC line for all patients. A Hickman line is likely to increase costs only marginally in the IV arm as these lines involve a surgeon’s time to be inserted.

OPAT, outpatient parenteral antimicrobial therapy.
Data analysis
The base-case analysis used an intention to treat approach conducted on the multiple imputed dataset. Total mean costs, QALYs and associated standard errors were presented as well as the difference in total mean costs and QALYs between arms and a 95% confidence interval. An incremental cost-effectiveness ratio (ICER) is also presented; representing the difference in costs divided by the difference in QALYs.

To explore the uncertainty around the cost and QALY differences and the resulting ICER, a non-parametric bootstrapping technique was employed with 1,000 iterations. Results are presented using a cost-effectiveness plane, showing all 1,000 cost-effectiveness pairs.

The analysis was conducted using Stata version 14 (StataCorp. 2015. Stata Statistical Software: Release 14. College Station, TX: StataCorp LP.)

Sensitivity analysis
Four sensitivity analyses were conducted: complete case analysis, mean imputation and two different assumptions for OPAT costs. Instead of using the above weighted average for participants with missing OPAT type, two scenarios were explored by varying the OPAT cost: applying solely the cost of a District Nurse, and applying solely the cost of Self-Administration.

Ethical approval
Research Ethics Committee Ref: 13/SC/0016 South Central Oxford REC B. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant by good clinical practice-trained research staff after assessing their understanding of the patient information sheet.

Results
Baseline characteristics are presented in Table 2. The participants were well matched with no significant differences.

A total of 1,054 participants were recruited between June 2010 and October 2015; 527 in each arm, with 39 having no end-point data. In total, 23 participants died during the trial. Clinical results from the trial indicate that oral antibiotics are non-inferior to intravenous antibiotics with regards to definitive treatment failure. Treatment failure occurred in 74 of 506 patients (14.6%) in the intravenous arm and in 67 of 509 participants (13.2%) in the oral arm. The difference in risk, oral (PO) compared to intravenous (IV), of definitive failure in the intention-to-treat analysis was -1.4 percentage points (95% confidence interval, -5.6 to 2.9). These results were mirrored in the complete case intention-to-treat population, the per-protocol analysis (at least 4 weeks of randomised treatment received) and worst-case scenario analysis. These results are presented in more detail in the clinical trial paper.

Resource use
Only 26 participants (2.5%) had missing resource use data; 12 in the intravenous arm and 14 in the oral arm. The results for complete case resource use are presented in Table 3, split between resources used in the initial 42-day intervention period and the remaining post-intervention period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Intravenous (n=527)</th>
<th>Oral (n=527)</th>
<th>Total (n=1054)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age, years</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median (interquartile range)</td>
<td>61 (49–70)</td>
<td>60 (49–70)</td>
<td>60 (49–70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>18–92</td>
<td>18–91</td>
<td>18–92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male, number (%)</td>
<td>320 (60.7)</td>
<td>358 (67.9)</td>
<td>678 (64.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline surgical procedure, number (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No implant or device present; debridement of chronic osteomyelitis performed</td>
<td>153 (29.0)</td>
<td>169 (32.1)</td>
<td>322 (30.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No implant or device present; debridement of chronic osteomyelitis not performed</td>
<td>25 (4.7)</td>
<td>29 (5.5)</td>
<td>54 (5.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debridement and implant retention</td>
<td>124 (23.5)</td>
<td>123 (23.3)</td>
<td>247 (23.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Removal of orthopaedic device for infection</td>
<td>89 (16.9)</td>
<td>78 (14.8)</td>
<td>167 (15.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prosthetic joint implant removed</td>
<td>68 (12.9)</td>
<td>67 (12.7)</td>
<td>135 (12.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prosthetic joint implant, one-stage revision</td>
<td>47 (8.9)</td>
<td>43 (8.2)</td>
<td>90 (8.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surgery for discitis, spinal osteomyelitis, or epidural abscess; debridement performed</td>
<td>8 (1.5)</td>
<td>5 (0.9)</td>
<td>13 (1.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surgery for discitis, spinal osteomyelitis, or epidural abscess; debridement not performed</td>
<td>13 (2.5)</td>
<td>13 (2.5)</td>
<td>26 (2.5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From the results in Table 3, it can be seen that for intervention resource use there was a statistically significant difference between arms in mean antibiotic and intravenous therapy duration. There were no statistically significant differences between arms in mean number of antibiotic prescriptions, number of inpatient admissions or inpatient duration. For resource use during the post-intervention period there was only a statistically significant difference between arms for intravenous therapy; the mean total number of days for which intravenous therapy was received was 34.62 days longer in the intravenous arm. Table 4 presents the mean costs in both arms for unadjusted complete cases.

The difference between arms in mean antibiotic and intravenous costs was statistically significant for intervention, post-intervention and total costs. However, there was only a statistically significant difference in mean total intervention costs, not for total post-intervention costs, £2,215 (95% CI £1,462 to £2,969) and £511 (95% CI -£343 to £1,366), respectively. This smaller and non-significant difference in total post-intervention costs is mainly due to lower intravenous costs after the initial 6-week intervention period.

The total mean cost combining intervention and non-intervention costs was £13,275 in the intravenous arm compared to £10,549 in the oral arm, a difference of £2,727, a statistically significant result.
An exploratory analysis estimating mean costs for intravenous and oral antibiotics for a 42-day course out with the intention to treat population was conducted. The mean cost of a 6-week course of antibiotics (drug only) was £997 (SD £873) for intravenous antibiotics and £188 (SD £648) for oral antibiotics, highlighting the higher costs for intravenous drugs.

Multiple imputation results are provided in Table 5. These results reflect the complete case results presented above (a difference of £2,727), with intravenous mean costs £2,740 higher than in the oral arm, statistically significant.

Health outcomes: QALYs
The utility values and missing data proportions for each follow-up point for the EQ-5D-3L questionnaire are presented in Table 6. The proportion of missing data is similar in both arms. Participants in the oral antibiotic arm started from a slightly higher utility at baseline; 0.330 (SD 0.379) compared to 0.298 (SD 0.363). At the 14-day follow-up the mean utility was higher in the intravenous arm compared to the oral antibiotics arm; 0.437 (SD 0.304) compared to 0.421 (SD 0.338). The mean utilities for the remainder of the follow-up points revert to being higher in the oral arm. There were no statistically significant differences in mean utilities at any follow-up point. The utilities in both arms improved at each follow-up point compared to the previous one.

The mean EQ-5D-3L utilities, along with 95% confidence intervals are presented in Figure 1.

Complete case QALYs for each follow-up point and overall are provided in Table 7. Results mirror those of the utilities with no statistically significant differences between arms at any follow-up point; intravenous 0.558 (SD 0.265) compared to oral 0.535 (SD 0.300). Results consider a zero-utility score for participants who died during the trial.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4. Unadjusted costs (complete case).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cost category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antibiotics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inpatient stays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intravenous costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total intervention costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-intervention period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antibiotics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inpatient stays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intravenous costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total non-intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antibiotics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inpatient stays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intravenous costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total costs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SD, standard deviation.
Table 5. Multiple imputation results - total mean costs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Intravenous mean cost (SD)</th>
<th>Oral mean cost (SD)</th>
<th>Difference (95% confidence interval)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>£13,274 (£446)</td>
<td>£10,534 (£453)</td>
<td>£2,740 (£1,488 to £3,992)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SD, standard deviation.

Table 6. EQ-5D-3L complete cases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Utilities</th>
<th>Intravenous</th>
<th>Oral</th>
<th>Difference (SE)</th>
<th>95% confidence interval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>N (%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline</td>
<td>0.298 (0.363)</td>
<td>0.330 (0.379)</td>
<td>386 (73.2%)</td>
<td>-0.032 (0.027)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 days</td>
<td>0.437 (0.304)</td>
<td>0.421 (0.338)</td>
<td>308 (58.4%)</td>
<td>0.016 (0.026)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42 days</td>
<td>0.513 (0.316)</td>
<td>0.531 (0.330)</td>
<td>366 (69.4%)</td>
<td>-0.018 (0.024)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>120 days</td>
<td>0.534 (0.337)</td>
<td>0.544 (0.354)</td>
<td>312 (59.2%)</td>
<td>-0.011 (0.028)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>365 days</td>
<td>0.564 (0.339)</td>
<td>0.576 (0.346)</td>
<td>301 (57.1%)</td>
<td>-0.016 (0.028)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SD, standard deviation; N, number; SE, standard error.

Figure 1. Complete case mean EQ-5D-3L utilities at baseline and follow-ups, with 95% confidence intervals.
A post-hoc regression of QALYs on ‘definite failure’ was conducted; the indicator variable for failure was found to be statistically significant, confirming that the EQ-5D-3L measure is sensitive to the endpoint, however the endpoint was found not to differ between arms.

Multiple imputation results are provided in Table 8. These reflect the complete case results; there is no statistically significant difference in QALYs; however, the results now favour the oral arm.

Cost-effectiveness analysis
In the incremental analysis (Table 9) base-case mean costs were observed to be lower in the oral arm and mean QALYs were higher in the oral arm, suggesting that the strategy of treating bone and joint infections with oral antibiotics is a dominant strategy (cheaper and with higher QALYs). The results of the sensitivity analyses indicate that the base-case conclusions were robust. Results for complete case, using mean imputation and altering the costs of OPAT were all consistent with the results from the base-case analysis; the total mean cost difference for all scenarios were within the range of £2,617 to £2,887. All of these results showed a statistically significant difference between arms. The results of multiple imputation and complete case QALYs show no statistically significant differences between arms. Uncertainty surrounding this result is explored further in the next section.

Uncertainty
The main uncertainty in the results relates to QALYs; the difference in QALYs between arms is not statistically significant.

The cost-effectiveness plane presented in Figure 2, shows 1,000 bootstrap samples of the ICER, along with a point estimate illustrating the mean differences in costs and QALYs between treatment arms. The graph also includes the lower and upper 95% confidence interval from the bootstrap samples, and a line illustrating the £30,000 threshold currently used by NICE to assess cost-effectiveness. All bootstrap samples had a lower cost in the oral arm compared to the intravenous arm, and the majority (82.8%) of cost-effectiveness pairs fall into the south-east quadrant, where higher QALYs and lower costs can be observed for the oral arm as compared with the intravenous arm, making an oral intervention dominant for these samples. A small number of samples fall into the south-west quadrant of the plane where patients in the oral arm have less QALYs than patients in the intravenous arm.

Discussion
Statement of principal findings
The difference in costs between arms was £2,740 in the base case results; the use of oral antibiotics in the early treatment of bone or joint infection is significantly cheaper compared to the use of intravenous antibiotics. The results of the EQ-5D-3L questionnaires reflected the trial primary outcome of definitive failures; there was no statistically significant difference in QALYs between arms. This is reinforced by the post-hoc regression of QALYs on ‘definite failure’, which confirmed that the EQ-5D-3L measure is sensitive to the endpoint, but the endpoint did not differ between arms. With oral antibiotics being clinically non-inferior to intravenous, no statistically significant difference in QALYs plus the costs in the oral arm being significantly less than in the intravenous arm during the trial, the results of the trial suggest that treating patients with bone and joint infections with oral antibiotics is a dominant strategy.

There was no statistically significant difference in antibiotic duration in the post-intervention period suggesting that participants in the oral arm were not prescribed more antibiotics once finished on the intervention antibiotic. This is reflected by the difference between arms in the number of antibiotic prescriptions during the post intervention period not being statistically

### Table 7. Quality adjusted life-years complete cases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality-adjusted life years</th>
<th>Intravenous</th>
<th>Oral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>N (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 days</td>
<td>0.014 (0.011)</td>
<td>297 (56.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42 days</td>
<td>0.037 (0.022)</td>
<td>265 (50.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>120 days</td>
<td>0.111 (0.063)</td>
<td>280 (53.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>365 days</td>
<td>0.365 (0.200)</td>
<td>224 (46.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total year</td>
<td>0.558 (0.265)</td>
<td>179 (34.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SD, standard deviation; SE, standard error.
### Table 9. Incremental cost-effectiveness results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Intravenous Mean costs (SE)</th>
<th>Oral Mean costs (SE)</th>
<th>Difference (95% confidence interval)</th>
<th>Intravenous Mean QALYs (SE)</th>
<th>Oral Mean QALYs (SE)</th>
<th>Difference (95% confidence interval)</th>
<th>Incremental cost per QALY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Base case (Multiple imputation)</td>
<td>£13,274 (£446)</td>
<td>£10,534 (£453)</td>
<td>£2,740 (£1,488 to £3,992)</td>
<td>0.537 (0.013)</td>
<td>0.545 (0.015)</td>
<td>-0.007 (-0.045 to 0.031)</td>
<td>Oral antibiotics dominant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete case</td>
<td>£13,275 (£10,113)</td>
<td>£10,549 (£10,371)</td>
<td>£2,727 (£1,473 to £3,980)</td>
<td>0.558 (0.265)</td>
<td>0.535 (0.300)</td>
<td>0.023 (-0.036 to 0.081)</td>
<td>Oral antibiotics dominant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean imputation costs</td>
<td>£13,141 (£10,036)</td>
<td>£10,406 (£10,269)</td>
<td>£2,736 (£1,508 to £3,963)</td>
<td>0.537 (0.013)</td>
<td>0.545 (0.015)</td>
<td>-0.007 (-0.045 to 0.031)</td>
<td>Oral antibiotics dominant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Nurse costs for all missing OPAT types</td>
<td>£13,274 (£448)</td>
<td>£10,657 (£463)</td>
<td>£2,617 (£1,354 to £3,880)</td>
<td>0.537 (0.013)</td>
<td>0.545 (0.015)</td>
<td>-0.007 (-0.045 to 0.031)</td>
<td>Oral antibiotics dominant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-administration costs for all missing OPAT types</td>
<td>£13,230 (£442)</td>
<td>£10,343 (£448)</td>
<td>£2,887 (£1,656 to £4,118)</td>
<td>0.537 (0.013)</td>
<td>0.545 (0.015)</td>
<td>-0.007 (-0.045 to 0.031)</td>
<td>Oral antibiotics dominant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

QALYs, quality-adjusted life years; SE, standard error; OPAT, outpatient parenteral antimicrobial therapy.

### Figure 2. Cost-effectiveness plane.
significant. As expected, the mean number of days that intravenous therapy was received during the intervention period was significantly higher in the intravenous arm; 28.22 days (95% confidence interval 24.66 to 31.77). Interestingly there was a significant difference in the post-intervention period also; 6.40 days (95% confidence interval 2.99 to 9.81). We found no significant difference in mean inpatient stay duration; however, there was a significant difference for median inpatient stay duration; 14 days (interquartile range 11 to 21) in the intravenous arm and 11 days (interquartile range 8 to 20) in the oral arm (p<0.001). The study assumed an economic evaluation of oral versus intravenous antibiotics for treating bone and joint infections. The trial was a large inclusive, pragmatic trial with most participants following their allocated treatment and retention was high.

Exploring uncertainty in the results using non-parametric bootstrapping estimates that in 82.8% of the bootstrap samples the oral strategy is dominant, and in 17.2% of the samples the intravenous strategy would result in higher QALYs than the oral strategy; however, still at a higher cost. There is 100% probability that the oral strategy saves money and no indication of superiority of the intravenous strategy on QALYS plus prior evidence of clinical non-inferiority. Results from sensitivity analyses results were consistent with the base case results.

Strengths and limitations of the research
This is the first economic evaluation of oral versus intravenous antibiotics for treating bone and joint infections. The trial was a large inclusive, pragmatic trial with most participants following their allocated treatment and retention was high.

Some of the limitations arose from the high level of missing data for the EQ-5D-3L questionnaire (from 26.4% at baseline to 45.7% at 365-days). No costs of surgery for treatment of bone and joint infections were included in this study; this was a pre-randomisation procedure.

Strengths and weaknesses in relation to other studies, discussing important differences in results
Despite the high economic burden of bone and joint infections, economic studies in this area are rare and there is a need for more economic evaluations of joint infections. No previous studies have explored the cost-effectiveness of oral antibiotics to treat bone and joint infections compared to oral antibiotics. A cost-effectiveness study, comparing exchange arthroplasty with debridement and prosthetic retention for infected total hip arthroplasty in the elderly, found debridement and retention improved quality-adjusted life expectancy and increased costs in 65- and 80-year-old men and women over a lifetime. The incremental cost-effectiveness ratio ranged from £500 for frail 80 year old men to £21,800 in 65 year old women. In an economic evaluation by Kapadia et al., the authors explored the use of chlorhexidine cloths prior to total knee arthroplasty and found that assuming 1,000 total knee arthroplasty patients a net saving of £2.1 million would occur. The study assumed an estimated cost of £130,000 per revision due to infection, with 22 patients in a cohort of 1,000 without use of the cloth becoming infected, and 6 infections in the cohort using the cloth. Two studies estimated revision costs for infected prostheses; for infected hips, estimated costs are £22,000 and for infected knees, £30,000. These costs included the revision surgery and subsequent inpatient stay. A 2013 review summarised the economic literature in the treatment of periprosthetic infections, looking at prevention, treatment and surgical options for periprosthetic infections.

Unlike OVIVA, the treatment costs included the cost of revision and a 1993 study estimated an average cost of £50,000 to £60,000 per patient with an infected total hip arthroplasty.

Meaning of the study
Annually in the UK, it is conservatively estimated that there are 6,350 post-operative bone and joint infections; if all of these were treated with oral antibiotics during the first six weeks of therapy there is a potential for savings to the NHS of around £17 million annually. The important non-financial benefits to patients receiving oral antibiotics include a shorter median inpatient stay as well as decreased indwelling intravenous catheter days with its associated inconvenience, discomfort and reduced complications. Ultimately, the savings made by the use of oral antibiotics in half of the trial participants have already exceeded the running costs of the clinical trial.

Unanswered questions and future research
Further savings in the management of bone and joint infection might be possible by defining the optimal duration of therapy. At present, there are few trial data to guide duration and, in the opinion of the authors, there may be considerable redundancy in current standard treatment protocols. The benefits of limiting systemic antimicrobial exposure may well include a reduction in selection for antibiotic resistance and a consequent cost saving in managing treatment failures or transmission events.

What is already known on this topic:
- The ‘gold standard’ treatment for bone and joint infections is surgery followed by a course of intravenous antibiotics
- There is a growing body of literature showing that oral antibiotics are as effective as intravenous in treating this cohort
- Oral antibiotics are less costly than intravenous antibiotics

What this study adds:
- Oral antibiotics are non-inferior compared to intravenous antibiotics in treating bone and joint infections with regards to definitive treatment failure
- Treating a bone or joint infection with an initial 6 weeks course of oral antibiotics saves an estimated £2,700 over one year, per person, compared to early treatment with intravenous antibiotics
Data availability

Underlying data

The ethical permissions governing this trial limit data sharing to approved studies of antibiotic treatment. Requests for participant level data should be directed to the chief investigator; Dr Matthew Scarborough (email address: Matthew.Scarborough@ouh.nhs.uk). Requests from interested parties will be granted access to the data when there is appropriate approval from their home institution for their analysis and where the purpose of the proposed analysis relates to antibiotic treatment, consistent with our ethical approval for sharing data.

Reporting guidelines

Figshare: CHEERS checklist for “Cost-effectiveness of oral versus intravenous antibiotics (OVIVA) in patients with bone and joint infection: evidence from a non-inferiority trial”.

The completed CHEERS checklist is available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY 4.0).

Author statement

NM, CG and AB conceived the presented idea. AB was co-investigator on the OVIVA project. NM carried out the analysis with input from CG and AB. NM and CG drafted the manuscript and AB, IR, HKL, PB, MM, BA, JF and MS contributed to the final version. MM conceived OVIVA, designed the protocol, obtained funding and recruited patients. PB conceived the OVIVA project, obtained funding, designed the protocol, recruited patients, gathered data and had general oversight of the OVIVA trial. MS was principle investigator of the OVIVA trial.

Grant information

The OVIVA study was funded by the National Institute for Health Research Health Technology Assessment programme (Project number 11/36/29). PB is funded by the Wellcome Trust (205814).

The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

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Simon Dixon  
Health Economics and Decision Science, School of Health and Related Research, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

General comment
The work is undertaken to a high standard, is clearly written and produces robust conclusions. The research is very important.
Some relatively minor details are omitted and need to be added. Some methods deviate from the ‘standard approach’, and as such, need to be justified more clearly.

Specific comments
1. An undefined personal communication is used for an important estimate. Either something should be said about its source (e.g. opinion or audit) or a published estimate should be used [first paragraph, p3].

2. "Missing resource and quality of life data was imputed….", should be “…were imputed” [middle paragraph, second column, p3].

3. More should be said in the Introduction or Methods about how IV and oral antibiotics are administered and the role of the OPAT team. This is important for readers to assess the generalisability of findings. It is also unclear how you can have an “inpatient” OPAT type [p4]; I thought OPAT was outpatient.

4. “…an appropriate method to replace missing data utilised”. On what basis was appropriateness assessed? Just giving a reference is insufficient. Also, I would have thought that Reference 11 would have been used for this assessment, but it is not referenced at this point. [p4]

5. In Table 1, simply saying that “insertion” and “Removal” costs were based on expert opinion is insufficient. Presumably, the experts didn't come up with the cost; they provided timings, staff grades and consumables, which were then costed up. Those resource estimates should be provided, possibly as notes to the table. [p4]
6. It is stated that QALYs were adjusted for baseline utility, but not how this was done; providing a reference is insufficient. If this was done statistically, which is implied by the reference, how did you then generate the bootstrapped estimates? [p4]

7. The statistical tests used to compare groups in all the tables are not described. These need to be justified.

8. The inpatient duration for oral therapy is almost identical to that for IV. An explanation of this needs to be given. A lay reader may equate oral therapy to home treatment and IV therapy to inpatient treatment, therefore inpatient duration may be expected to be similar to number of days of IV therapy. [p6]

9. The sentence starting “Table 4 presents...” should be the first sentence of the next paragraph.

10. An exploratory analysis appears in the middle of the results, would this be better framed as a sensitivity analysis? The way it is presented suggest that it is unplanned/post-hoc.

11. Is Table 5 necessary? The results are given in the text anyway (except for the estimates of variation, which could be added). [p8]

12. The post-hoc regression of QALYs on failure is not a result; it should be part of the discussion about the perceived weakness of the EQ-5D for this condition/study. [p9]

13. The description of the bootstrapped replications in cost-effectiveness plane on [p9] and [p11] don't seem to match the figure, for example 82.8% fall into the south east quadrant. Do you mean, fall to right of the cost-effectiveness threshold line? You also say that 17.2% of the sample result in higher QALYs, really?

14. The threshold line in the SE quadrant is not necessary. [p10]

15. The statement starting “There is a 100% probability that...” includes an ‘and statement' which makes interpretation confusing/difficult. This needs to be re-written. You may also want to consider qualifying the statement by saying that it relates to this particular set of bootstrapped samples, another set may produce a lower probability. [p11]

16. Something needs to be said about covariate adjustment within the economics analysis. Whilst an adjustment has been made for baseline utility (but not described sufficiently), it is common in economic evaluation for other covariates to be included in a regression based analysis, sometimes in the form of a related regression on QALYs. Whilst I don’t consider this to be a big issue in this instance, the authors should describe this alternative approach and explain the appropriateness their approach, this is methodological uncertainty.

17. Something needs to be said about the truncation of data. Alternative methods would be to take account of this within a regression analysis of costs and QALYs using appropriate specifications, or to extrapolate the costs/QALYs. Again, whilst I don’t consider this to be a big issue in this instance, the authors should describe this alternative approach and explain the appropriateness of their approach, this is methodological uncertainty.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

**Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?**
Partly

**Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?**
Partly

**If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?**
Partly

**Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?**
Yes

**Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?**
Yes

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

**Reviewer Expertise:** Health economics.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.