Antibody Profiles in Mild and Severe Cases of COVID-19

To the Editor:

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has spread to more than 200 countries and territories. As of 13 May 2019, there are >4 million confirmed cases, and about 7% of these patients have died from the infection. Nucleic acid amplification tests are the methods of choice for detecting COVID-19 patients at early disease onset. Several serological tests have been developed for detecting SARS-CoV-2-specific antibodies for clinical research (1, 2). Farnsworth and Anderson have recently highlighted the limitations of SARS-CoV-2 antibody testing for routine clinical application due to limited data regarding its utility (3). Here, we report the use of antibody tests to study severe and mild COVID-19 cases.

RT-PCR confirmed COVID-19 patients admitted to the First Affiliated Hospital of Nanchang University, China were studied. Patients who had one of the following conditions at the time of, or following admission, were classified as severe cases: 1) respiratory distress (≥30 breaths/min), 2) oxygen saturation at rest ≤93%, 3) PaO2/FiO2 ratio ≤300 mmHg, or 4) severe complications (e.g., respiratory failure, requirement of mechanical ventilation, septic shock, and/or nonrespiratory organ failure). Amongst these 192 patients, 83 (43%) were classified as severe cases. Single or serial serum samples (N = 1019; sampling period: 01/29/2020–03/28/2020) collected from these 192 patients were tested for SARS-CoV-2 spike protein receptor binding domain (RBD)-specific IgM or total antibodies (IgA/IgG/IgM) using two commercial microparticle chemiluminescence immunoassays (Wantai). In addition, 144 control sera collected in the same period were tested. All control samples were negative in the IgM assay and 98.6% (142/144) were negative in the total antibody assay (Fig. 1, A and B).

We first stratified our results according to the date of disease onset and disease severity. The IgM antibody responses of mild and severe cases within the first 6 days of disease onset were not statistically different from each other (Fig. 1A; P > 0.05). Interestingly, the IgM profile of mild cases was found to be statistically different from the severe cases thereafter. Severe cases had significantly higher IgM titers than mild cases after Day 6 post-onset (Fig. 1A). The mean IgM titer of severe cases peaked at about Day 21 post-symptom onset, whereas the mild cases did not have such a sharp peak over time. We noted that only 46.9% of all tested mild case samples were IgM positive, whereas 85.7% of all tested severe case samples were IgM positive. From samples taken within Days 7–12 post-onset, the IgM positive rate of severe cases was higher than that of mild cases (P = 0.013; chi-square test). Additionally, all severe patients were IgM positive from Days 13 to 18 post-symptom onset, whereas only 57% of mild patients were positive in this period.

The titers of severe cases for the total antibody test were also statistically higher than those of mild cases from Days 7–42 post-symptom onset (Fig. 1B). Over 99% of severe patients from Day 13 of disease onset or beyond were positive by the total antibody test. The overall positivity rate of severe cases (98.7%) was higher than that of mild cases (83.0%) (P < 0.00001; chi-square test). These results are similar to those seen above for the IgM antibody test, suggesting that COVID-19 patients are more likely to mount robust antibody responses in severe cases. In addition, unlike the IgM profile as described above, the total antibody titers of both severe and mild cases remained at high levels until the end of our study period.

We noted that several mild cases were serologically negative in our assays. We further analyzed data from 35 patients with multiple serial samples (N > or = 3) in whom there was at least 1 sample collected before Day 19. Strikingly, 34.3% (12/35) and 14.3% (5/35) of studied mild patients were consistently serologically negative for IgM and total antibody (data not shown), respectively. In addition, those who were negative in the total antibody test were also negative in the IgM test. By contrast, all severe patients (N = 42) with multiple serial samples had at least 1 positive sample in these tests.

In this study, we observed that patients with severe COVID-19 are more likely to mount robust antibody responses than those with mild cases. Our results agree with those reported by Zhou and colleagues (4). It is not known whether the enhanced antibody responses are associated with the immunopathology observed in severe COVID-19 cases (5). Owing to the limitation of our assays, the antibody profiles of IgG and IgA in the studied patients could not be determined. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that there were several mild COVID-19 cases that failed to develop antibodies against the RBD-domain of the spike protein. These results might have implications for clinical diagnosis, serological surveillance and control policies (e.g., immunity passport) for COVID-19. It is not known whether these mild cases can develop antibodies against other epitopes of SARS-CoV-2. Further characterization of
Fig. 1. Antibody profiles of all COVID-19 patients. The levels of IgM (panel a) and total Ab (panel b) specific for the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein receptor binding domain (RBD) from patients at different periods after disease onset are shown (Day 1: the first day symptoms begin). The cut off value of positivity for each assay is indicated by a dotted line. The numbers of tested cases in severe and mild groups are indicated. Control serum samples (green; N = 144) were collected from individuals who were not known to have COVID-19-like symptoms, but none of these donors were screened for SARS-CoV-2 by RT-PCR. Mann-Whitney test: ****P < 0.0001, ***P < 0.001, **P < 0.01; *P < 0.05.
this group of mild cases is warranted.

Author Contributions: All authors confirmed they have contributed to the intellectual content of this paper and have met the following 4 requirements: (a) significant contributions to the conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; (b) drafting or revising the article for intellectual content; (c) final approval of the published article; and (d) agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the article thus ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the article are appropriately investigated and resolved.

L.L.M. Poon, financial support, statistical analysis, administrative support.

Authors’ Disclosures or Potential Conflicts of Interests: Upon manuscript submission, all authors completed the author disclosure form. Disclosures and/or potential conflicts of interest:

Employment or Leadership: None declared.

Consultant or Advisory Role: M. Peiris, WHO.

Stock Ownership: None declared.

Research Funding: This work was supported by the Health and Medical Research Fund (Hong Kong, COVID190116) and Emergency Science and Technology Project for COVID-19 of Jiangxi province (202011-2). L.L.M. Poon is supported by Croucher Foundation.

Expert Testimony: L.L.M. Poon, World Health Organization.

Patents: None declared.

Acknowledgments: We thank Scarlett Yan for her technical support.

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Clinical Performance of the Elecsys Electrochemiluminescent Immunoassay for the Detection of SARS-CoV-2 Total Antibodies

To the Editor:

In the context of COVID-19, a wide range of serology immunoassays with different SARS-CoV-2 antigen recognition and antibody specificity have been developed to complement reverse transcription PCR (RT-PCR) assays (1). Serological testing is useful for diagnosis and characterization of the course of the disease, identification of convalescent plasma donors, epidemiology studies, lockdown exit programs, and COVID-19 vaccine development (2, 3). Given the widespread dissemination of these new methods and the limited experience with these assays, it is crucial for laboratories to rigorously validate these methods before broad introduction into routine clinical practice. Independent validations are also needed to ensure that the assays are in line with expected analytical and clinical performance specifications (1–4).

This study is the first to report the external validation of a new electrochemiluminescent immunoassay, the Elecsys anti-SARS-CoV-2 from Roche Diagnostics. This test allows the detection of total antibodies (including IgG) specifically directed against the SARS-CoV-2 nucleocapsid and is performed on the cobas e801 module. The test result is given as a cutoff index. According to the manufacturer, a result <1.0 is considered negative, and a result ≥1.0 is considered positive (5).

DOI: 10.1093/clinchem/hva137