Higher frequency of comorbidities in fully vaccinated patients admitted to the ICU due to severe COVID-19: a prospective, multicentre, observational study

To the Editor:

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) vaccination campaign in Spain began on 27 December 2020 [1]. To date, more than 36 million people have been fully vaccinated, with most of the population, namely 25.3 million people (69.1%), receiving BNT 162b2 (Pfizer/BioNTech) [1]. With respect to other vaccines and figures, 4.8 million (13.2%) people have received AZD1222 (Oxford/AstraZeneca); 4.5 million (12.3%) mRNA-1273 (Moderna); and 2.0 million (5.4%) JNJ-78436735 (Janssen) [1].

Vaccination uptake has radically changed how the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) infection has impacted healthcare systems [2, 3]. Since the initiation of the campaign, a total of 19 705 patients with severe COVID-19 have required admission to intensive care unit (ICU) in Spain, the vast majority with no vaccination or an incomplete regimen [1]. Although vaccination has been shown to be notably effective, a few fully vaccinated patients can develop severe COVID-19 requiring ICU admission. To our knowledge, there is no description of this cohort of patients.

Within the CIBERESUCICVID consortium [4], we reported a prospective, multicentre and observational study that characterised fully vaccinated patients admitted to seven Spanish ICUs for severe COVID-19 between 25 January and 14 September 2021. These patients developed COVID-19 symptoms at least 2 weeks after administration of either a single-dose COVID-19 vaccine (JNJ-78436735) or the second dose of a two-dose vaccine. Exclusion criteria for this study included unconfirmed SARS-CoV-2 infection; ICU admission due to other causes; or incomplete vaccination status. Data was collected as previously described [4]. For the purpose of comparison, we included 105 consecutive, non-vaccinated adult patients with laboratory-confirmed SARS-CoV-2 infection requiring admission to the same seven ICUs between 25 January and 13 May 2021.

Continuous variables are reported as median (interquartile range) and compared between groups using the Mann–Whitney test. Categorical variables are reported as frequencies (percentages) and compared using Fisher’s exact test.

The study received approval by the institution’s internal review board (Comité Ètic d’Investigació Clínica, registry number HCB/2020/0370), and we obtained informed consent from either patients or their relatives.

During the study period, a total of 1585 patients were admitted to ICUs across seven Spanish hospitals due to COVID-19. Of those, 1314 (82.9%) were unvaccinated; 161 (10.2%) had not completed the vaccination regimen; and 110 (6.9%) were fully vaccinated. Data from 81 (73.6%) fully vaccinated patients were available for the analysis.

Demographics and clinical characteristics of the fully vaccinated population are detailed in table 1. In summary, the median age was 68.0 (60.0–74.0) years; 35 (43.2%) patients were aged ≥70 years, whilst only five patients were <50 years. 72% (n=58) of these patients were male. All of the patients but two had at least one comorbidity, whereas 69.1% (n=56) had three or more. The most frequent comorbidity was...
### TABLE 1  Characteristics of fully and non-vaccinated, intensive care unit (ICU)-admitted patients with COVID-19

|                          | Fully vaccinated patients (n=81) | Non-vaccinated patients (n=105) | p-value |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------|
| **Baseline characteristics** |                                 |                                 |         |
| Age, years               | 68.0 (60.0–74.0)                | 65.0 (55.0–73.0)                | 0.24    |
| Male                     | 58 (71.6%)                      | 71 (67.6%)                      | 0.63    |
| BMI, kg·m⁻²              | 27.6 (24.9–31.7)                | 30.1 (26.5–33.7)                | 0.010   |
| **Comorbidities**        |                                 |                                 |         |
| Number of comorbidities  | 3 (2–4)                         | 2 (1–4)                         | 0.005   |
| Hypertension             | 61 (75.3%)                      | 52 (49.5%)                      | <0.001  |
| Chronic cardiac disease  | 15 (18.5%)                      | 15 (14.3%)                      | 0.55    |
| Chronic respiratory disease | 21 (25.9%)                  | 16 (15.2%)                      | 0.095   |
| Chronic renal disease    | 16 (19.8%)                      | 10 (9.5%)                       | 0.055   |
| Obesity (BMI >30 kg·m⁻²) | 30 (37.0%)                      | 57 (54.3%)                      | 0.026   |
| Diabetes mellitus        | 35 (43.2%)                      | 26 (24.8%)                      | 0.011   |
| Immunosuppression         | 28 (34.6%)                      | 11 (10.5%)                      | <0.001  |
| Solid organ transplant   | 13 (46.4%)                      | 8 (27.7%)                       |         |
| Active malignancy        | 11 (39.3%)                      | 0                               |         |
| Autoimmune disease       | 3 (10.7%)                       | 2 (18.2%)                       |         |
| Chronic immunosuppressor treatment | 1 (3.6%)         | 1 (5.6%)                        |         |
| Active or former smoker  | 30 (37.0%)                      | 42 (40.0%)                      | 0.76    |
| **Disease chronology**   |                                 |                                 |         |
| Days from last vaccine dose to COVID-19 symptoms | 75.0 (47.0–95.0) |                       |         |
| Days from COVID-19 onset to hospital admission | 6.0 (4.0–8.0) | 8.0 (6.0–10.0) | <0.001  |
| Days from hospital admission to ICU admission | 1.0 (0–3.0) | 1.0 (0–3.0) | 0.20    |
| Days from ICU admission to IMV | 1.0 (0–3.0) | 0 (0–1.0)                     | 0.001   |
| **ICU admission**        |                                 |                                 |         |
| APACHE II score          | 12 (9–17)                       | 10 (8–13)                       | 0.003   |
| SOFA score               | 4 (3–5)                         | 4 (3–6)                         | 0.64    |
| **Adjuvant treatments**  |                                 |                                 |         |
| COVID-19 therapies       | 28 (34.6%)                      | 12 (11.4%)                      | <0.001  |
| Remdesivir               | 21 (75.0%)                      | 7 (58.3%)                       |         |
| Tocilizumab              | 14 (50.0%)                      | 3 (25.0%)                       |         |
| Convalescent plasma      | 3 (10.7%)                       | 2 (16.7%)                       |         |
| Subcutaneous heparin     | 77 (95.1%)                      | 104 (99.0%)                     | 0.17    |
| Low dose (≤1 mg·kg⁻¹ per day) | 61 (75.3%)                  | 76 (73.1%)                      |         |
| High dose (>1 mg·kg⁻¹ per day) | 16 (19.8%)                 | 28 (26.9%)                      |         |
| Vasopressor treatment    | 37 (45.7%)                      | 58 (55.2%)                      | 0.24    |
| Continuous neuromuscular blockers | 39 (48.1%)            | 70 (66.7%)                      | 0.016   |
| Corticosteroids          | 76 (93.8%)                      | 104 (99.0%)                     | 0.087   |
| **Supportive therapies** |                                 |                                 |         |
| High-flow oxygen cannula | 65 (80.2%)                      | 56 (53.3%)                      | <0.001  |
| NIMV                     | 21 (25.9%)                      | 25 (23.8%)                      | 0.86    |
| IMV                      | 45 (55.6%)                      | 76 (72.4%)                      | 0.020   |
| Prone position           | 42 (51.9%)                      | 62 (59.0%)                      | 0.23    |
| ECMO support             | 1 (1.2%)                        | 1 (1.0%)                        | 1.00    |
| Renal replacement therapy | 10 (12.3%)                     | 4 (3.8%)                        | 0.047   |
| Limitation of life-sustaining care | 16 (19.7%)              | 7 (6.7%)                        | 0.012   |
| **Complications**        |                                 |                                 |         |
| Nosocomial bacterial pneumonia | 22 (27.2%)                    | 45 (42.9%)                      | 0.032   |
| Ventilator-associated pneumonia | 16 (29.7%)                    | 35 (32.8%)                      | 0.76    |
| Microbiological diagnosis | 41 (81.8%)                      | 42 (93.3%)                      | 0.21    |
| Pseudomonas aeruginosa   | 7 (10.9%)                       | 10 (23.8%)                      |         |
| Klebsiella spp.          | 4 (22.2%)                       | 2 (4.8%)                        |         |
| Staphylococcus aureus    | 3 (16.7%)                       | 11 (26.2%)                      |         |
| Acinetobacter baumannii  | 2 (11.1%)                       | 2 (4.8%)                        |         |
| Other                    | 5 (27.8%)                       | 20 (47.6%)                      |         |
| Acute renal injury       | 23 (28.4%)                      | 25 (23.8%)                      | 0.50    |
| Pulmonary embolism       | 6 (7.4%)                        | 8 (7.6%)                        | 1.00    |
| Myocardial infarction    | 1 (1.2%)                        | 1 (1.0%)                        | 1.00    |
| Heart failure            | 3 (3.7%)                        | 2 (1.9%)                        | 0.65    |
| Stroke                   | 0 (0%)                          | 2 (1.9%)                        | 0.51    |
| Liver dysfunction        | 32 (39.5%)                      | 32 (30.5%)                      | 0.22    |

Continued
hypothesis, being present in 61 (75.3%) patients. 28 (34.6%) patients had an immunocompromised status. The percentage of obese (BMI $\geq 30$ kg·m$^{-2}$) patients was 37.0% (n=30). Patients required ICU admission after a median time of 82.0 (55.0–101.0) days since vaccination, and APACHE II (Acute Physiology and Chronic Health Evaluation II) and SOFA (Sepsis-related Organ Failure Assessment) scores at this time point were 12 (9–17) and 4 (3–5), respectively. All patients showed bilateral pulmonary infiltrates. Additionally, 35 of 81 (43.2%) vaccines administered were BNT 162b2; 26 (32.1%) JNJ-78436735; 16 (19.8%) mRNA-1273; and four (4.9%) AZD1222.

Amongst the fully vaccinated population, 45 (55.6%) received invasive mechanical ventilation. 42 (51.9%) patients were placed in the prone position, and only one patient received extracorporeal membrane oxygenation support. All but five (93.8%) patients received corticosteroids. Furthermore, all patients but four (95.1%) received subcutaneous anticoagulation; 72 (88.9%) underwent antimicrobial therapies. 22 (27.2%) patients were diagnosed with nosocomial bacterial pneumonia, whilst 23 (28.4%) patients suffered acute kidney failure.

The in-hospital mortality rate was 34.6%, and the main causes of death included respiratory failure (n=19, 27.2%) patients were diagnosed with nosocomial bacterial pneumonia, whilst 23 (28.4%) patients suffered acute kidney failure.

To our knowledge, this study is the first descriptive report of fully vaccinated patients requiring ICU admission due to severe COVID-19. The main finding of this study is that patients with specific comorbidities and full vaccination regimen may be at risk of developing severe COVID-19, even though vaccines have proven to be greatly effective in the general population [2, 3, 5]. Importantly, only 7% of patients with severe COVID-19 were fully vaccinated. We observed a notably high incidence of comorbidities in this population, especially as they relate with vascular disease (i.e., hypertension, diabetes mellitus and chronic renal disease) and immunosuppression status. When we compared this incidence with that of a non-vaccinated group of patients requiring ICU admission during coinciding periods, we observed a three-fold increase in immunosuppression; chronic respiratory disease, renal disease, diabetes mellitus and hypertension rates almost doubled. Of note, the median time between the onset of symptoms and hospital admission was significantly shorter for fully vaccinated cases than unvaccinated patients with COVID-19.

Contou et al. [6] have described a second-wave French cohort of non-vaccinated patients. This cohort had similar or slightly increased comorbidity rates compared to those of our non-vaccinated group, albeit lower than that of our fully vaccinated patients. Juthani et al. [7] and Brosh-Nissimov et al. [8] have reported small series of fully vaccinated patients that required hospitalisation, including mild to severe patients. Like our study, both investigations found a high rate of comorbidities amongst severe or critically ill patients [7, 8].
In a case–control study including 35 fully vaccinated patients admitted to the ICU, TENFORDE et al. [9] found that the significant association between hospitalisation for COVID-19 and decreased likelihood of vaccination was weaker in immunocompromised patients than immunocompetent patients.

The implications of our findings are manifold. First, these findings encourage discussion on the possible need for further interventions, such as the use of COVID-19 vaccine boosters, in this population. Some recent studies have already debated the practicality of a third dose of the vaccine [10–12]. Our data suggest that patients with comorbidities may benefit from these strategies.

Secondly, the substantial number of immunocompromised patients also suggests a poorer immune response in this population. Previous data have already demonstrated that some of these patients had low antibody levels after full vaccination [13, 14]. In this context, more personalised management of immunosuppressed patients, e.g. measuring antibody levels after vaccination, could prove to be a reasonable option.

Lastly, an increase in comorbidities directly impacts ICU management and the clinical outcomes of a fully vaccinated population. Some studies have already discussed prognosis in patients with previous comorbidities who develop COVID-19 [15, 16]. Indeed, we still observed high ICU mortality rate in fully vaccinated patients, reaching similar levels to previous reports, including those in fully vaccinated patients [6–8, 17, 18]. Worsening of underlying illnesses and/or lower vaccine effectiveness in those patients may provide an explanation for these high rates [8]. Nevertheless, we observed no differences in mortality between both groups, despite higher rates of comorbidities in fully vaccinated patients. Of note, a final decision to not increase supportive measures was made in 16 (19.8%) fully vaccinated patients.

Our study has some limitations, however. First, we collected data from a small cohort. A larger sample size would be ideal to confer a more robust generalisation of our results. Second, our control group was a small sample of the large, non-vaccinated population. As both study periods partially overlapped, it is also worth considering the role of emerging SARS-CoV-2 variants in these scenarios. Finally, we were not able to know the SARS-CoV-2 viral load and variant, or antibody titres before COVID-19 onset.

To conclude, only 7% of patients with severe COVID-19 were fully vaccinated. Nonetheless, a clinical scenario of severe COVID-19 disease requiring ICU admission is possible amongst the vaccinated population, especially in those with comorbidities and/or immunosuppression. Therefore, further interventions to improve vaccine response, including an additional dose, might be necessary for this population.

Anna Motos1,2,16, Alexandre López-Gavín2,16, Jordi Riera 3, Adrián Ceccato1, Laia Fernández-Barat1,2, Jesús F. Bermejo-Martin4,5, Ricard Ferrer 1, David de Gonzalo-Calvo1,6, Rosario Menéndez7, Raquel Pérez-Arnal9, Dario García-Gasulla 5, Alejandro Rodríguez2, Oscar Peñuelas1,10, José Ángel Lorente3,10, Raquel Almansa4,5, Albert Gabarrús2, Judith Marin-Corral1, Pilar Ricart12, Ferran Roche-Campo13, Susana Sancho Chinesta14, Lorenzo Socías15, Ferran Barbé1,6 and Antoni Torres 1,2 on behalf of the CIBERESUCICOVID Project (COV20/00110, ISCIII)

1Centro de Investigación Biomédica En Red – Enfermedades Respiratorias (CIBERES), Barcelona, Spain. 2Institut d’Investigacions August Pi i Sunyer (IDIBAPS), Barcelona, Universitat de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain. 3Intensive Care Dept, Hospital Universitari Vall d’Hebron, Vall d’Hebron Institut de Recerca, Barcelona, Spain. 4Hospital Universitario Río Hortega de Valladolid, Valladolid, Spain. 5Instituto de Investigación Biomédica de Salamanca (IBSAL), Gerencia Regional de Salud de Castilla y León, Salamanca, Spain. 6Translational Research in Respiratory Medicine, Respiratory Dept, Hospital Universitari Aranu de Vilanova and Santa Maria; IRBLleida, Lleida, Spain. 7Pulmonary Dept, University and Polytechnic Hospital La Fe, Valencia, Spain. 8Barcelona Supercomputing Centre (BSC), Barcelona, Spain. 9Critical Care Dept, Hospital Joan XXIII, Tarragona, Spain. 10Hospital Universitario de Getafe, Universidad Europea, Madrid, Spain. 11Critical Care Dept, Hospital del Mar-IMIM, Barcelona, Spain. 12Servei de Medicina Intensiva, Hospital Universitari Germans Trias, Badalona, Spain. 13Critical Care Dept, Hospital Verge de la Cinta, Tortosa, Spain. 14Servicio de medicina intensiva, Hospital Universitario y Politécnico La Fe, Valencia, Spain. 15Intensive Care Unit, Hospital Son Llàtzer, Palma de Mallorca, Spain. 16A. Motos and A. López-Gavín equally contributed to the manuscript.

Corresponding author: Antoni Torres (atorres@clinic.cat)

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