May Measurement Month 2018: an analysis of blood pressure screening results from Italy

Camilla Torlasco1,2, Andrea Faini1, Claudio Ferri3, Guido Grassi4,2, Massimo Salvetti5,6, Maurizio Destro7, Arrigo F.G. Cicero8, Ferruccio Galletti9,10, Lorenzo Ghiadoni11, Stefano Carugo12,13, Riccardo Sarzani14,15, Pietro Minuz16, Alberto Morganti17, Paolo Mulatero18, Giuseppe Mule19, Carmine Savoia20, Massimo Volpe21, Claudio Borghi22, Thomas Beaney23,24, Anca Chis Ster23, Neil R. Poulter23, Xin Xia23, and Gianfranco Parati21,2

1Department of Cardiovascular, Neural and Metabolic Sciences, Istituto Auxologico Italiano, IRCCS, San Luca Hospital, Piazzale Brescia 20, Milan 20149, Italy;
2Department of Medicine and Surgery, University of Milan-Bicocca, Piazza dell’Ateneo Nuovo 1, 20126 Milan, Italy;
3Department of Life, Health and Environmental Sciences, University of L'Aquila, piazza Santa Margherita 2, 67100, L’Aquila, Italy;
4Policlinico di Monza, Via Amati, 111 - 20900, Monza, Italy;
5Department of Clinical & Experimental Sciences and Postgraduate School of Emergency & Urgency Medicine, University of Brescia, Via Amati, 111 - 20900, Brescia, Italy;
62a Medicina-ASST Spedali Civili Brescia, Piazzale Spedali Civili, 1 25123, Brescia, Italy;
7Medical Science, ASST Bergamo Ovest, Piazzale Ospedale 1, 24047, Treviglio, Italy;
8Medical and Surgical Sciences Department, University of Bologna, Via Zamboni, 33, 40126, Bologna, Italy;
9Department of Clinical Medicine and Surgery, ESH Excellence Center of Hypertension, Naples, Via Pansini, 5 - 80131, Italy;
10“Federico II” University of Naples Medical School, Corso Umberto I 40, Naples, 80138, Italy;
11Department of Clinical and Experimental Medicine, University of Pisa, Pisa, Lungarno Antonio Pacinotti, 43, 56121, Italy;
12Division of Cardiology, San Paolo University Hospital, Via Antonio di Rudini, 8, 20142, Milan, Italy;
13Department of Health Sciences, University of Milan, ia Festa del Perdono, 7, 20122, Milan, Italy;
14Internal Medicine and Geriatrics, ‘Hypertension Excellence Centre’ of the European Society of Hypertension, IRCCS INRCA, Via Festa del Perdono, 7, 20122, Ancona, Italy;
15Department of Clinical and Molecular Sciences, University ‘Politecnica delle Marche’, ia Tronto, 10/a, 60126, Ancona, Italy;
16Department of Medicine, Unit of General Medicine for the Study and Treatment of Hypertensive Disease, Policlinico GB Rossi, University of Verona, Piazzale L.A. Scuro, 10, 37134, Verona, Italy;
17Centro Fisiologia Clinica e Ipertensione, Ospedale Policlinico, Università Milano, Via Francesco Sforza, 35, 20122, Milan, Italy;
18Division of Internal Medicine and Hypertension, Department of Medical Sciences, University of Torino, Via Giuseppe Verdi, 8, 10124, Torino, Italy;
19Department of Health Promotion, Mother and Child Care, Internal Medicine and Medical Specialties, Unit of Nephrology and Hypertension, European Society of Hypertension Excellence Centre, University of Palermo, Piazza Marina, 61, 90133, Palermo, Italy;

*Corresponding author. Tel: +39 02619112949, Fax: +39 02619112956, Email: gianfranco.parati@unimib.it

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Cardiovascular (CV) diseases are burdened by high mortality and morbidity, being responsible for half of the deaths in Europe. Although hypertension is recognized as the most important CV risk factor, hypertension awareness and blood pressure (BP) control are still unsatisfactory. In 2017, 30.6% of a >10 000 individual sample who took part in the May Measurement Month (MMM) campaign in Italy was found to have high BP. To raise awareness on the hypertension issue and to report BP data on a nation-wide scale in Italy. In the frame of the MMM campaign, an opportunistic cross-sectional survey of volunteers aged ≥18 was carried out in May 2018. Blood pressure measurement, the definition of hypertension and statistical analysis followed the standard MMM protocol. Screenings were conducted in multiple sites by health care personnel. Among the 5554 people screened (females: 48.3%, mean age 58 ± 17 years) mean BP was 127/77 mmHg, and after imputations, 1462 (26.3%) participants were found to have high BP levels. Body mass index ≥25 was associated with high BP only. Our data provide a nation-wide snapshot of BP control in a sample of individuals participating in a national health care campaign, and confirm the power of this kind of healthcare-related activities in reaching a significant number of people to raise awareness on health topics. The apparent positive trend in BP control compared to available data from other similar campaigns carried out during the past years needs to be confirmed with more methodologically robust studies.

Introduction

Cardiovascular (CV) diseases (CVDs) are responsible for more than half of all deaths across Europe. Thanks to a combination of modifiable and unmodifiable factors, including but not limited to unhealthy lifestyle and improved survival to acute events, their prevalence is on the rise.1 In 2016, the Italian Agency of Statistics (ISTAT) reported a yearly incidence of 367 deaths due to CVDs per 100 000 inhabitants, corresponding to a total of approximately 220 200 deaths. Of these, 69 653 were due to ischaemic heart disease, and 57 230 to cerebrovascular diseases.2

The effectiveness of total CV risk reduction in preventing events is universally accepted1,4 and up to 80% of premature heart disease and stroke are considered preventable.5 Arterial hypertension, known as the silent killer, represents the most important independent risk factor for CVDs,6 with a reported prevalence in Italy ranging from 55% to 59% of the adult population,7 with target blood pressure (BP) values reportedly achieved in ≈50% of known hypertensives.8 For this reason, the Italian Society of Hypertension has been active over many years in raising awareness in both the general population and health professionals on this issue, taking part each year for more than a decade in the World Hypertension Day activities, promoted by the World Hypertension League/International Society of Hypertension. On these bases, taking part in the May Measurement Month (MMM) initiative9,10 was just the natural step forward, with the aim of reaching as many people as possible and of stimulating them to develop a more proactive attitude towards management of their cardiovascular risk profile, in particular in relation to their BP levels. In 2017, thanks to the invaluable contribution of more than 300 investigators affiliated to the Italian Society of Hypertension and of the Italian Red Cross, which supported the initiative with logistics and personnel, we were able to reach more than 10 000 people.11 In 2018, we decided to administer a more complete questionnaire, collecting data on anthropometric variables as well as on comorbidities, a choice which has allowed us to obtain more comprehensive information, but a the price of a lower number of subjects accepting to participate.

Methods

MMM18 activities in Italy were co-ordinated by the Council of the Italian Society of Hypertension as in previous years. Informed consent was obtained for each participant onsite. No personal information was requested, as all forms were anonymously filled in. During the month of May 2018, 91 sites in Italy operated for a different number of days (from 1 to 5 days depending on the site), interviewing and measuring the BP of individuals aged 18 and over who decided to stop by. A total estimated number of 200 volunteers...
were involved in the campaign. Blood pressure measuring stations were available inside hospitals and at crossroads, with the logistical support of the Italian Red Cross, both in cities and villages. All the staff had a training in health care and received specific training on BP measurements. Either doctors, nurses, paramedics, and medical students performed the BP recordings and administered an ad hoc created questionnaire. In addition, outdoor measurements were performed in walled gazebos, in order to keep the ambient temperature controlled and to allow seated rest of suitable duration before the measurement. All selected devices had been validated accordingly to the ESH-IP protocol and BP measurements were performed according to the European Society of Hypertension/European Society of Cardiology (ESH/ESC) 2018 guidelines. In brief, three consecutive measurements were collected in the sitting position, with back and arm supported, after a 5-min rest. Hypertension was defined as BP >140/90 mmHg (average of the 2nd and 3rd measurements) and/or evidence of treatment with antihypertensive medication. Furthermore, height and weight reported by the participants were recorded, alongside with the history of cardiovascular risk factors.

The study was bottom funded, i.e. each centre which decided to take part in the activity printed its own questionnaires and BP forms and then sent the hard copies to the core lab for data entry facilitated by optical character recognition technology. Data were centrally analysed by the MMM team in London with multiple imputation according to the standard analysis plan.9

Results

Our sample consisted of 5554 participants (females: 48.3%), aged 58 ± 17 years. The absolute number of participants per age groups increased by each decade after 39 years old, reaching the maximum for the age group >70 years, which counted 1581 subjects, representing 28.5% of the whole sample.

Active smoking was reported by 825 subjects (14.9%), diabetes by 446 (8.0%), previous myocardial infarction by 399 (7.2%), and previous stroke by 122 (2.2%). Mean body mass index was 25.4 ± 4.4, with 47.3% of subjects being of normal weight or underweight and 49.3% overweight or obese (these data were not available in 3.4% of subjects).

Average BP (mean of reading 2 and 3) was 127/77 mmHg, with a proportion of hypertensives (as previously defined) after imputation of 26.3% out of the 5554 subjects screened.

Known hypertension (N = 1692, 30.5%) was associated with higher systolic BP (SBP) and diastolic BP (DBP) (P < 0.0001 for both), whilst diabetes was associated with higher SBP only. Furthermore, patients who reported a previous myocardial infarction had lower DBP (P = 0.026). Accordingly, obesity (14%) and overweight (35.3%) status were associated with higher SBP and DBP (P < 0.0001 for all), whilst underweight status (2.8%) was associated with lower SBP/DBP compared to normal weight (44.5%, P < 0.0001 for SBP, P = 0.002 for DBP) (see Figure 1).

Discussion

Our data, obtained through a cross-sectional survey, provide a contemporary update on BP values collected nationwide from a sample of the Italian population. As described, 26.3% of the screened individuals were found to be hypertensive, a proportion slightly lower than the one reported by our group in 2017 in the same frame of the MMM campaign (30.8% out of a sample of >10 000 individuals),11 and in 2015, in a similar campaign conducted during the World
Hypertension Day (36% out of a sample of 8657 individuals). Similarly, the reported average BP values slightly but progressively decreased from 2015 (133/80 mmHg) to 2017 (130/78 mmHg) to 2018 (127/77 mmHg). Although recorded over the years which might help to reduce CV progressive reduction in the average BP levels we have with the final goal of improving BP control (as shown by the in a carefully standardized manner and to spread higher reach a significant number of people, to measure their BP age increases.3

By joining the MWM campaign, we have thus been able to reach a significant number of people, to measure their BP in a carefully standardized manner and to spread higher awareness on hypertension and its untoward consequences with the final goal of improving BP control (as shown by the progressive reduction in the average BP levels we have recorded over the years) which might help to reduce CV morbidity and mortality.

Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at European Heart Journal Supplements online.

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Conflict of interest: none declared.

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