Bone mineral density is within normal range in most adult phenylketonuria patients

Charlotte M. A. Lubout1 | Francisco Arrieta Blanco2 | Katarzyna Bartosiewicz3 | François Feillet4 | Maria Gizewska3 | Carla Hollak5 | Johanna H. van der Lee6 | François Maillot7 | Karolina M. Stepien8 | Margreet A. E. M. Wagenmakers9 | Mendy M. Welsink-Karssies1 | Francjan J. van Spronsen10 | Annet M. Bosch1

1Department of Pediatrics, Emma Children's Hospital, Amsterdam UMC – Location AMC, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
2Servicio de Endocrinología y Nutrición, Hospital Universitario Ramón y Cajal, Madrid, Spain
3Department of Pediatrics, Endocrinology, Diabetology, Metabolic Diseases and Cardiology of the Developmental Age, Pomeranian Medical University in Szczecin, Szczecin, Poland
4Department of Pediatrics, Hôpital d'Enfants Brabois, CHU Nancy, Nancy, France
5Department of Internal Medicine, Division of Endocrinology and Metabolism, Amsterdam UMC – Location AMC, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
6Pediatric Clinical Research Office, Woman-Child Center, Amsterdam UMC – Location AMC, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
7Service de Médecine Interne, CHRU de Tours, Université de Tours, UMR INSERM, Tours, France
8Mark Holland Metabolic Unit, Adult Inherited Metabolic Disorders, Salford Royal NHS Foundation Trust, Salford, United Kingdom
9Center for lysosomal and metabolic disease, Department of Internal Medicine, Erasmus MC, University Medical Center Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
10Section of Metabolic Diseases, Beatrix Children's Hospital, University of Groningen, University Medical Center Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

Abstract
Low bone mineral density (BMD) as a risk factor for fractures has been a long-standing concern in phenylketonuria (PKU). It is hypothesised that the disease itself or the dietary treatment might lead to a low BMD. Previous studies show conflicting results of BMD in PKU due to differences in age, techniques to assess BMD and criteria used. To assess the prevalence of low BMD and define possible risk factors in a large number of adult, early treated PKU (ETPKU) patients. European centres were invited for a survey, collecting retrospective data including results of dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry (DXA) scans of adult ETPKU patients. BMD of 183 adult ETPKU patients aged 18-46 (median age 28, all females premenopausal) years was lower than in the general population at most skeletal sites but the frequency of low BMD (Z-score ≤−2) was at maximum 5.5%. No risk factors for low BMD in PKU patients could be identified. Low BMD occurs only

Abbreviations: BMD, bone mineral density; BMI, body mass index; DXA, dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry; ETPKU, early treated PKU; FNBMD, femoral neck bone mineral density; ISCD, International Society for Clinical Densitometry; LBMD, lumbar bone mineral density; PAH, phenylalanine hydroxylase; Phe, phenylalanine; PKU, phenylketonuria; RBMD, radius bone mineral density; TBMD, total body bone mineral density; TFBMD, total proximal femur bone mineral density.
in a small subset of PKU patients. DXA scans should be considered for well-controlled patients from age 35-40 years and up and on indication in those PKU patients considered to be at increased risk for fractures.

KEYWORDS
phenylketonuria, bone mineral density, bone health, dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry

1 | INTRODUCTION

Phenylketonuria (PKU, ORPHA79254, MIM 261600) is an inborn error of metabolism in which deficiency of the enzyme phenylalanine hydroxylase (PAH; EC 1.14.16.1) causes high phenylalanine (Phe) concentrations which lead to intellectual disability if left untreated. Since the 1960's-1970's, patients are detected early by newborn screening and treatment with a Phe-restricted diet is started immediately. This results in a near normal outcome of development. However, as the first early treated PKU (ETPKU) patients become older, new concerns about long term consequences of PKU and its treatment arise. Most attention is given to the neurocognitive issues and psychosocial functioning, but also bone health has been a long-standing concern in PKU patients. It is hypothesised that the Phe restricted diet or the disease itself might lead to a low bone mineral density (BMD) in PKU. However, previous studies show conflicting results due to differences in assessing BMD and different criteria for defining low BMD. Furthermore, most studies included a small number of patients. In 2015, the meta-analysis by Demirdas and colleagues showed that low BMD for chronological age, defined as a Z-score ≤−2 (in agreement with the International Society for Clinical Densitometry (ISCD) criteria) is expected in approximately 10% of ETPKU patients. However, previous studies show conflicting results due to differences in assessing BMD and different criteria for defining low BMD. Furthermore, most studies included a small number of patients. In 2015, the meta-analysis by Demirdas and colleagues showed that low BMD for chronological age, defined as a Z-score ≤−2 (in agreement with the International Society for Clinical Densitometry (ISCD) criteria) is expected in approximately 10% of ETPKU patients. However, previous studies show conflicting results due to differences in assessing BMD and different criteria for defining low BMD. Furthermore, most studies included a small number of patients. In 2015, the meta-analysis by Demirdas and colleagues showed that low BMD for chronological age, defined as a Z-score ≤−2 (in agreement with the International Society for Clinical Densitometry (ISCD) criteria) is expected in approximately 10% of ETPKU patients. However, previous studies show conflicting results due to differences in assessing BMD and different criteria for defining low BMD. Furthermore, most studies included a small number of patients. In 2015, the meta-analysis by Demirdas and colleagues showed that low BMD for chronological age, defined as a Z-score ≤−2 (in agreement with the International Society for Clinical Densitometry (ISCD) criteria) is expected in approximately 10% of ETPKU patients. However, previous studies show conflicting results due to differences in assessing BMD and different criteria for defining low BMD. Furthermore, most studies included a small number of patients. In 2015, the meta-analysis by Demirdas and colleagues showed that low BMD for chronological age, defined as a Z-score ≤−2 (in agreement with the International Society for Clinical Densitometry (ISCD) criteria) is expected in approximately 10% of ETPKU patients. However, previous studies show conflicting results due to differences in assessing BMD and different criteria for defining low BMD. Furthermore, most studies included a small number of patients. In 2015, the meta-analysis by Demirdas and colleagues showed that low BMD for chronological age, defined as a Z-score ≤−2 (in agreement with the International Society for Clinical Densitometry (ISCD) criteria) is expected in approximately 10% of ETPKU patients. However, previous studies show conflicting results due to differences in assessing BMD and different criteria for defining low BMD. Furthermore, most studies included a small number of patients. In 2015, the meta-analysis by Demirdas and colleagues showed that low BMD for chronological age, defined as a Z-score ≤−2 (in agreement with the International Society for Clinical Densitometry (ISCD) criteria) is expected in approximately 10% of ETPKU patients. However, previous studies show conflicting results due to differences in assessing BMD and different criteria for defining low BMD. Furthermore, most studies included a small number of patients. In 2015, the meta-analysis by Demirdas and colleagues showed that low BMD for chronological age, defined as a Z-score ≤−2 (in agreement with the International Society for Clinical Densitometry (ISCD) criteria) is expected in approximately 10% of ETPKU patients.

2 | METHODS

Seventeen European centres specialised in treating adult PKU patients were invited to participate in a survey study collecting retrospective data of individual adult ETPKU patients. Participating centres were asked to complete a questionnaire for all early treated (start treatment <4 weeks of age), adult (≥18 years) PKU patients of whom data of dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry (DXA) was available. Exclusion criteria were chronic conditions affecting bone health; chronic malabsorption disease, chronic use of steroids (>5 mg of prednisolone daily for 3 months or longer), rheumatoid arthritis, immobility, hypogonadism, organ transplantation, type 1 diabetes mellitus, thyroid disorders, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease as well as a postmenopausal state.

The questionnaire included deidentified data involving demographics, anthropometrics, diet, and supplements, mean Phe (μmol/L) during the year before the recent DXA scan (one centre included mean Phe of the 2 years before the recent DXA scan), use of sapropterin dichloride, low vitamin D concentration (defined as 25-OH vitamin D <50 nmol/L), (number of) fractures, smoking or ex-smoker status, and alcohol consumption. The (most recent) DXA results in Z-score were collected for different skeletal sites; lumbar (LBMD), femoral neck (FNBMD), total proximal femur (TFBMD), radius (RBMD), and total body (TBMD). According to the ISCD criteria Z-scores and not T-scores were used as the studied patients involved premenopausal women and men <50 years of age. A BMD Z-score ≤−2 SD was defined as below the expected range for age (low BMD), and a Z-score >−2 was defined as within the expected range for age.

Data was collected in Castor EDC, a good clinical practice compliant data management system.

The medical ethics committee of the Amsterdam UMC, AMC, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, confirmed that for this survey study collecting retrospective data the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act (WMO) did not apply and informed consent was not required. This article does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by any of the authors.

2.1 | Statistical analysis

Sample size calculation by the Lehr’s formula revealed that a sample size of at least 80 patients (after correction for...
unequal sized groups\(^2\)) was sufficient to yield 80% power
to detect a difference of at least 7.6% in prevalence of low
BMD in ETPKU patients compared to the general popula-
tion with a type I error of 5%, based on the available data by
Demirdas et al.\(^8\)

Analysis was performed using IBM SPSS statistics 23. Nor-
mally distributed data was compared by parametric tests (one
sample t test or unpaired t test), non-normally distributed data
was analysed by non-parametric tests (Wilcoxon signed rank
test or Mann-Whitney U test). Categorical data was analysed

| Table 1 | Characteristic of included patients |
|---------|-----------------------------------|
| **Continuous data** | N | Median (range) |
| Age at data collection (years) | 183 | 32 (19-53) |
| Age most recent DXA (years) | 183 | 28 (18-46) |
| Recent BMI | 179 | 24.9 (17.5-49) |
| Mean Phe the year before the most recent DXA (μmol/L) | 168 | 775 (61-1816) |
| **Categorical data** | N | % |
| Gender | 183 | Male 42 |
| Disease severity based on Phe before treatment\(^1,2\) | 87 | Classic PKU (Phe ≥1200) 68 |
| | | Mild PKU (Phe >600 and <1200) 22 |
| | | Mild hyperphe (Phe ≤600) 10 |
| Natural protein intake | 183 | Missing or not adherent to a diet 16 |
| | | Severe protein restriction (≤10 g/day) 24 |
| | | Moderate protein restriction (>10 to 20 g/day) 21 |
| | | Mild protein restriction (>20 to 40 g/day) 16 |
| | | Protein intake > recommended intake (>40 g/day)\(^a\) 23 |
| Sapropterin dichloride use | 167 | Yes 14 |
| | | No (not tested or unresponsive) 86 |
| Low vitamin D concentration (25-OH vitamin D <50 nmol/L) | 173 | Yes 32 |
| Vitamin D supplementation | 162 | Yes 26 |
| Calcium supplementation | 161 | Yes 19 |
| (ex) Smoker status | 106 | Yes 22 |
| Alcohol consumption (on average >2 units/day) | 106 | Yes 26 |

Abbreviations: BMI, body mass index; DXA, dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry; PKU, phenylketonuria.
\(^a\)An amount of >40 g was based on the safe amount of protein of 0.8 g/kg/day according to FAO/WHO/UNU with some patients weighing around 50 kg.

Analysis was performed using IBM SPSS statistics 23. Nor-
mally distributed data was compared by parametric tests (one
sample t test or unpaired t test), non-normally distributed data
was analysed by non-parametric tests (Wilcoxon signed rank
test or Mann-Whitney U test). Categorical data was analysed

| Table 2 | Mean, median BMD Z-scores, and % low BMD measured at several skeletal sites |
|---------|-----------------------------------|
| Skeletal site | N | Mean Z-score (+1 SD) | Median Z-score (range) | Compared to general population\(^b\) | Number (%) low BMD\(^c\) |
| Lumbar | 181 | -0.527 (+ 1.030) | -0.600 (-2.8;2.6) | \(P < .0000^*\) | 10 (5.5) |
| Femoral neck | 111 | -0.324 (+ 0.913) | -0.400 (-2.4;2.0) | \(P = .0003^*\) | 4 (3.6) |
| Total proximal femur | 128 | -0.262 (+ 0.925) | -0.300 (-2.4;2.9) | \(P = .002^*\) | 2 (1.6) |
| Radius | 55 | -0.298 (+ 1.176) | -0.400 (-3.2;1.8) | \(P = .065\) | 3 (6) |
| Total body\(^a\) | 88 | - | -0.400 (-5.9;2.7) | \(P = .002^*\) | 4 (5) |

Abbreviation: BMD, bone mineral density.
\(^a\)Not normally distributed.
\(^b\)Mean Z-score= 0.
\(^c\)Defined as Z-score ≤−2.\(^1,4\)
\(^*\)Significantly different from the general population (\(P < .05\)) after post-hoc adjustment of \(P\) value by Bonferroni method (multiplying \(P\) value by the number of tests (5)).
**Table 3** Comparison of possible risk factors between patients with low BMD (Z-score ≤−2) and patients with BMD within normal range (Z-score >−2)

|            | Low BMD | Normal BMD | P (Mann-Whitney U test) |
|------------|---------|------------|-------------------------|
| Continuous data |         |            |                         |
| Age most recent DXA (year) | N=10 | Median 27.5 | N=171 | Median 28.0 | .864 |
| Recent BMI | 10 | 21.7 | 167 | 24.9 | .053 |
| Mean Phe the year before the recent DXA (μmol/L) | 10 | 800 | 156 | 775 | .573 |

| Categorical data | Low BMD N (%) | Normal BMD N (%) | P (Fisher's Exact test) |
|------------------|---------------|------------------|-------------------------|
| Gender M | 8 (80) | 68 (40) | .018* |
| Sapropterin dichloride use yes | 1 (11) | 22 (14) | >.99 |
| Low vitamin D concentration yes | 5 (50) | 50 (31) | .294 |
| Vitamin D supplementation yes | 3 (38) | 39 (26) | .434 |
| Calcium supplementation yes | 3 (38) | 27 (18) | .174 |
| (ex) Smoker status yes | 0 | 23 (23) | .574 |
| Alcohol consumption (on average >2 units/day) yes | 2 (50) | 25 (25) | .272 |
| Natural protein intake | Missing or not adherent to a diet | 3 (30) | 27 (16) | .588 |
| | Severe protein restriction (≤10 g/day) | 1 (10) | 42 (25) |
| | Moderate protein restriction (>10 to 20 g/day) | 1 (10) | 35 (21) |
| | Mild protein restriction (>20 to 40 g/day) | 2 (20) | 28 (16) |
| | Protein intake > recommended intake (>40 g/day)* | 3 (30) | 39 (23) |

Abbreviations: BMD, bone mineral density; BMI, body mass index; DXA, dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry.

*An amount of >40 g was based on the safe amount of protein of 0.8 g/kg/day according to FAO/WHO/UNU with some patients weighing around 50 kg.

*Not significant (P ≥ .05) after post-hoc adjustment of P value by Bonferroni method (multiplying P value by the number of tests (11)).
by a $\chi^2$ or Fishers Exact test. In case of multiple hypothesis testing, a post-hoc analysis was done by the Bonferroni method (multiplying $P$-value by the number of tests). A $P$-value <.05 was considered statistically significant.22,24,25

In case of multiple DXA scans in one patient, the most recent was selected for analysis. Mean BMD (Z-score) was assessed for the different skeletal sites and compared to the expected mean Z-score (0) in the general population. Frequency of low BMD was calculated.

The spine and hip region are the sites of preference to measure BMD.14,19 Several possible risk factors were taken into consideration when comparing patients with a low BMD at the spine level and those with a BMD within normal range. They included; gender, age at time most recent DXA, recent Body Mass Index, natural protein intake, use of calcium and vitamin D supplements, use of sapropterin dichloride, mean Phe the year before the recent DXA scan, low vitamin D concentration, and lifestyle factors (smoking and alcohol consumption).4,7,10-13,18,19,26 Not for all patients with a statement of normal diet the exact amount of natural protein intake was available. Before statistical analysis was performed, natural protein intake was categorised according to the following groups; (a) missing or not adherent to a diet, (b) severe protein restriction (≤10 g/day), (c) moderate protein restriction (>10 to 20 g/day), (d) mild protein restriction (>20 to 40 g/day), (e) protein intake > recommended intake (>40 g/day). An amount of >40 g was based on the safe amount of protein of 0.8 g/kg/day according to FAO/WHO/UNU with some patients weighing around 50 kg.3

Frequency of fractures was compared to the estimated age-standardised fracture prevalence as described for England.27

### 3 | RESULTS

A total of 8 (out of 17 invited) European metabolic centres, situated in France, Poland, Spain, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, participated in the study. Among 9 other centres, 3 could not participate for various reasons and 6 did not respond.

For most centres all of the patients were included. In 2 centres not all patients could be included within the inclusion period. Therefore, a random selection of patients was made to prevent bias (selection on alphabetical order or order of appearance at the outpatient clinic).

Data of a total of 216 patients were received. Thirty-three patients were excluded for the following reasons: no early treatment $N = 11$, most recent DXA scan <age 18 years $N = 11$, or significant co-morbidity that might affect BMD $N = 11$, resulting in a total number of 183 to be analysed.

The characteristics of the included patients are presented in Table 1. Based on the Phe concentration before diagnosis and/or the natural protein intake, most of the included patients have severe PAH deficiency. The mean individual Phe concentration the year before the recent DXA was performed showed a wide range, with a median for the group of 775 μmol/L.2-4

Most BMD results were available for the spinal level. Mean BMD Z-scores were significantly lower in PKU patients compared to the reference population for all skeletal sites except the radius. The lowest result was seen for the spine with a mean Z-score of −0.527 (+1.030). Frequency of low BMD (defined as a Z-score ≤−2) was observed in 1.6% to 5.5% with the maximum being observed at the spinal level (Table 2).

No statistically significant differences were found in possible risk factors between patients with low BMD and patients with a BMD within normal range (Table 3).

Fractures were described in 30 patients (16.4%), which is significantly lower than the estimated age-standardised fracture prevalence of 38.2% ($P < .000$) as described for England.27 Of those patients who had experienced a fracture, 7 sustained more than 1 fracture. There was insufficient data on which fractures were fragility fractures. There was no significant difference in mean LBMD Z-score between patients with fractures and patients without known fractures ($P = .97$).

### 4 | DISCUSSION

This multicentre study of BMD in adult ETPKU patients shows that, although the mean BMD in ETPKU patients is significantly lower compared to the general population, BMD is within normal range in most patients. The prevalence of low BMD is at most observed at the lumbar spine in 5.5% of patients, which is lower than described in the meta-analysis by Demirdas et al and other previous studies.8,10-13

This difference could be explained by the fact that most studies included in the meta-analysis focused on a combination of both paediatric and adult PKU patients. Assessing BMD in children is hampered by several factors and it is known that low BMD might be overestimated in children with a chronic illness.16,17 Also in the study of De Groot et al, low BMD was described in only 6% of adult patients while the percentage tended to be higher in children.7 The only previous study which focused exclusively on BMD in adult PKU patients, used other definitions (osteopenia and osteoporosis; not according to the current ISCD definition) but a Z-score ≤−2.5 was detected in 6.5%.15 In addition, more recent studies that focused on BMD in both children and adults found low BMD defined as $Z$-score ≤−2 in 4.5% to 7.4% of the total group of PKU patients.28,29 As the present study focuses on adults who are expected to have achieved their peak bone mass,18 this is probably a more reliable reflection of BMD in PKU.
4.1 Risk factors for low BMD

In our study population no risk factors for low BMD could be identified. This is in agreement with other studies. The prediction model described by Coakley et al, although based on a small number of patients, found dietary factors like compliance, medical food prescriptions, and vitamin D intake to be of influence. In the present study, it was not possible to draw conclusions on the exact amount of natural protein intake and medical food protein but an association with non-adherence to diet, low vitamin D concentration, or vitamin D supplementation was not found. Some studies show that deficiencies in essential fatty acids can be seen in PKU, but there is limited evidence that this might be related to BMD in PKU. Our study did not investigate this.

4.2 Fracture risk

Fracture prevalence in our population was lower than the age-standardised fracture prevalence as described for the population of England. It is reasonable to consider that this is more or less comparable with the prevalence of fractures in Europe. The low fracture rate found in this study could be explained by several reasons. Most importantly, in view of the retrospective design of this study, the number of fractures may have been underestimated. Other reasons might be a difference in participation in high fracture risk activities such as specific sports between ETPKU patients and the general population which was not evaluated in this study. Previous studies focusing on fractures in PKU reported a comparable risk to the general population as well as a higher fracture risk above age 8 detected in a very young group of PKU patients measured by parent or self-report. BMD is not the only factor that determines the risk of fractures, to assess the fracture probability in the general population other risk factors should be taken into account. The Fracture Risk Assessment Tool (Frax) is available for fracture risk assessment above age 40 years.

4.3 Recommendations

Altogether, most ETPKU patients have a BMD within normal range, with only a maximum of 5.5% having a low BMD. As mean BMD is lower compared to the general population, the prevalence of low BMD might be higher in PKU patients >35-40 years of age, when bone mass is known to decline. With the present data it can be argued that a DXA scan should be requested in PKU patients who have an age >35-40 years or in case of additional risk factors for fractures like prolonged immobility, hypogonadism, chronic use of steroids, malabsorption, alcohol abuse, previous fragility fractures, or other conditions that cause an increased fracture risk. The European PKU guideline advices (best practice based) to perform a first DXA scan in adolescence. Based on the present study it is a consideration to perform the first DXA scan in a well regulated PKU patient without further risk factors for fractures not in adolescence but at an age >35-40 years.

4.4 Strengths and limitations

The strength of the present study is the relatively large number of patients, the fair proportion of patients with an age in their fourth decade, and the participation of centres from different European countries, making the study population representative of the European ETPKU population. In addition, the study population included many patients with severe PKU (based on Phe before start of treatment or natural protein intake).

However, all patients were seen in a centre specialised in PKU, making this a relatively well monitored population. Therefore the results might not be applicable to less regulated patients.

Most participating centres routinely performed a DXA scan in all their patients, some centres only made a DXA scan in a selection of patients. This might have caused bias in the prevalence of low BMD. However, it is more likely that only the patients who are thought to be at risk for low BMD will be selected for a DXA scan. In that case, the reported prevalence of low BMD is an overestimation.

Only the most recent DXA scans were selected for analysis as BMD was thought to be more relevant in older patients. It could be argued that in patients with multiple DXA scans, a result of low BMD would result in a change of treatment influencing the most recent DXA. However, no factors of influence could be identified, making less likely that interventions like vitamin D supplementation or a change in diet directed by an earlier DXA scan resulted in an improved BMD.

Due to the low prevalence of low BMD, the total number of patients with low BMD was 10, hampering additional analysis focusing on risk factors. Because of this small number a multiple regression model was not considered as a most suitable test.

As dietary factors were derived from patient charts, the data were not complete enough to draw conclusions on total protein and medical food protein. Preferably dietary diaries filled in by patients should be used to correlate BMD with dietary factors.

The described fracture prevalence was based on chart studies which are less reliable than an observational study or assessment of patient reported fracture risk.

Although the study included some of the oldest ETPKU patients >40 years of age, predictions on BMD in older age...
cannot be made. As bone loss occurs with advancing age\textsuperscript{18,19} future studies in elderly, ETPKU patients are warranted to assess how often low BMD is seen in advancing age and whether these patients have an increased fracture risk.

5 CONCLUSION

Mean BMD in early treated adult PKU patients is lower than in the general population but the frequency of low BMD is at maximum 5.5%. DXA scans should be done in well controlled PKU patients \(>35-40\) years of age and in those PKU patients considered to be at increased risk for fractures.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

C.M.A.L. has received a speaker fee from the Recordati Rare Disease Foundation.

M.G. has been a member of scientific advisory boards for PKU (supported by Merck Serono, BioMarin, and Nutricia International). She has received honoraria as consultant and speaker for Merck Serono, BioMarin, Nutricia International, Danone, Mead Johnson, and Vitaflor.

C.H. is involved in pre-marketing studies with Sanofi, Takeda, and Idorsia in the field of lysosomal storage disorders.

F.M. has been a member of scientific advisory boards for PKU (supported by Merck Serono and BioMarin). He has received honoraria as consultant for BioMarin, and as speaker for BioMarin, Nutricia International, and Vitaflor. He has received research grants from Merck Serono and BioMarin.

M.A.E.M. Wagenmakers received funding for an independent research proposal from the Nutricia metabolic Research Fund.

F.J.v.S. is a member of scientific advisory boards for defects in amino acid metabolism of APR, Arla Food International, BioMarin, Eurocept Int, Lucana, Moderna TX, Nutricia, Rivium, and SoBi, has received research grants from Alexion, BioMarin, Codexis, Nutricia, SoBi, and Vitaflor, has received grants from patient organisations ESPKU, Metakids, NPKUA, Stofwisselkracht, Stichting PKU research, and Tyrosinemia Foundation, and has received honoraria as consultant and speaker from APR, BioMarin, MendeliKABS, and Nutricia.

A.M.B. has been a member of the advisory board of BioMarin in 2017 and had received a speaker fee from Nutricia in 2017.

F.A.B., K.B., F.F., J.H.v.d.L., K.M.S., and M.M.W.-K. declare that they have no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR' CONTRIBUTIONS

Design of the study and interpretation of the data was done by C.L., F.J.S., A.B. C.L., F.A., K.B., F.F., M.G., C.H., F.M., K.S., M.W., A.B. contributed to the data collection. C.L. and M.W.K. were involved in constructing the database. C.L. performed the statistical analysis with help of J.H.L. C.L., F.J.S., A.B. were involved in drafting the manuscript. All authors were involved in revising the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY

Original data will be made available to the editors if requested.

ORCID

Charlotte M. A. Lubout https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8058-440X

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