Robotic-Assisted vs. Standard Laparoscopic Surgery for Rectal Cancer Resection: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of 19,731 Patients

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Abstract: Robotic-assisted surgery is expected to have advantages over standard laparoscopic approach in patients undergoing curative surgery for rectal cancer. PubMed, Cochrane Library, Web of Science, Scopus and Google Scholar were searched from database inception to 10 November 2021, for both RCTs and observational studies comparing robotic-assisted versus standard laparoscopic surgery for rectal cancer resection. Where possible, data were pooled using random effects meta-analysis. Forty-Two were considered eligible for the meta-analysis. Survival to hospital discharge or 30-day overall survival rate was 99.6% in RG vs. 98.8% for LG.

Simple Summary: Surgery remains a mainstay of combined modality treatment at patients with rectal cancer; however, there is a growing interest in using laparoscopic techniques (LG); including robotic-assisted techniques (RG). Therefore, we have prepared a meta-analysis of the literature regarding the safety and efficacy of robotic versus laparoscopic approaches in patients undergoing curative surgery for rectal cancer. The results indicate a number of advantages of RG in terms of both safety and efficacy. Operative time in the RG group was shorter and associated with a statistically significantly lower conversion of the procedure to open surgery. RG technique provided a shorter duration of hospital stay and lowered urinary risk retention. No differences were found between these techniques regarding TNM stage; N stage or lymph nodes harvested. Survival to hospital discharge or 30-day overall survival rate was 99.6% in RG vs. 98.8% for LG.
Keywords: rectal cancer; robotic-assisted laparoscopic; conventional laparoscopic surgery; outcome; systematic review; meta-analysis

1. Introduction

Colorectal cancer remains the second most common cause of death in the Western world, and rectal localization accounts for approximately 25% of its cases. Surgery remains a mainstay of combined modality treatment at patients with rectal cancer. Total Mesorectal Excision (TME) proposed by Heald et al. [1] became a golden standard, improving both surgical radicalness of cancer eradication and quality of life due to hypogastric nerves preservation and its impact on urinary avoidance and sexual functions. Direct vision enabled by St Marks retractors and more extended tools allow one to resect mesorectum within the intact fascia, obtain a proper circumferential margin (CRM) and thus better oncologic radicalness through eradicating cancer deposits localized within mesorectum, resected en bloc together with and affected organ. This has been the opposite for former blunt resections performed directly with an unarmed surgeon hand, leaving part of the structures mentioned above with cancer cells within the pelvis as the gateway to local recurrence.

Furthermore, the adoption of laparoscopic TME enabled equal or, in some aspects, superior results compared to open surgery. Those are lower CRM positivity rates at patients with tumours of the lower third part of the rectum, as shown in effects of the COLOR II trial [2]. The oncologic safety of laparoscopy, equal to open surgery, has been shown in different studies. The laparoscopic approach was superior to open surgery in terms of lower pain, faster recovery, shorter hospital stay and better cosmesis [3,4].

However, some substantial difficulties are present, especially during the operations at patients with tumours of the lower rectum. Those are: problems with obtaining a good view with a rigid optical system in the narrow pelvis, difficult maneuvering with long and rigid laparoscopic tools with their lack of flexibility and the hand and tool tremor, even with minimal or a loss of tactile sensation. As mentioned above, several critical organs are localized in close proximity to the narrow space of the pelvis, with access even more difficult in males and obese patients. The robotic-assisted approach was therefore accepted into the surgical armamentarium.

In 2006 Pigazzi et al. described a robot-assisted laparoscopic approach to TME. Its introduction enables potential omitting difficulties mentioned above through better 3D vision, wristed instruments enabling a higher range of maneuverability in the narrow pelvis, tremor’s abolition [5]. Robotic surgery in the treatment of rectal cancer patients has been endorsed like laparoscopy had been before, sharing the same principles but with other, improved tools overcoming aforementioned problems. Although some positive short-term aspects of robotic surgery superior to the laparoscopic approach were shown, there are no long-term outcomes proven in clinical trials. Finally, there comes an issue of cost-effectiveness of robotic surgery, expensive and with some disparities in reimbursement across different health care systems.

Therefore, we aimed to systematically assess the available evidence in the literature regarding the safety and efficacy of robotic versus laparoscopic approach in patients undergoing curative surgery for rectal cancer.

2. Materials and Methods

This systematic review and meta-analysis was done according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analysis (PRISMA) statement [6] (Table S1). The study protocol has been deposited in the PROSPERO database prior to the start of the study. No protocol changes were made during the study. All analyses were based on previously published studies; thus, ethical approval or patient consent was not suitable for this meta-analysis.
2.1. Literature Search and Selection

Comprehensive systematic searches of online electronic databases, including PubMed, Cochrane Library, Web of Science, Scopus and Google Scholar from databases inception to November 10th, 2021, were performed. We searched the literature using the following keywords: “rectal cancer*” OR “rectal adenocarcinoma” OR “rectal tumor” OR “rectal neoplasms” AND “robotic” OR “laparoscopic” AND “surgery” OR “resection”. All records were searched by two researchers (M.P. and K.S.) separately. The decision to include or exclude a study was also made by two independent researchers. Disagreements were solved through discussion with third researcher (L.S.). The search of databases was restricted to English publications. No limitation was set for age of participants in the searched articles. We also manually checked the reference lists in each involved publication to identify eligible studies.

Studies that were included in this meta-analysis had to fulfill the following PICOS criteria: (1) Adult patients who were diagnosed with rectal and were treated with rectal cancer surgery; (2) Intervention, robotic-assisted rectal cancer surgery; (3) Comparison, laparoscopic rectal cancer surgery; (4) Outcomes, detailed information for survival or mortality; (5) Study design, randomized controlled trials comparing robotic-assisted vs. standard laparoscopic surgery for rectal cancer resection. Studies were excluded if: (1) don’t present comparator group; (2) literatures are reviews, conference articles, editorial, letters or duplicated publications.

2.2. Data Extraction and Quality Assessment

All the following information was separately extracted by two researchers (K.S. and L.S.): first author name, year of publication, region of cohort, patient characteristics (i.e., no. of patients, age, sex), intraoperative data (i.e., operative time, blood loss, conversion to open rate), tumor pathological data (i.e., TNM stage, lymph nodes harvested, tumor size) or postoperative outcomes (survival rate, disease free-survival rate, length of hospital stay; adverse event types). Discrepancies were resolved through discussion with the third researcher (J.S.). Data from included studies were recorded using a Microsoft Excel (Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, WA, USA) specific predefined report form. When data about the primary outcomes were missing, we planned to contact the corresponding author of the original study.

We compared data items, outcomes, design strengths and weaknesses across the studies. For each study, the risk of bias was assessed at the study level using the Rob2 tool for randomized [7] trials and ROBINS-I bias assessment tool for non-randomized studies [8]. The Robvis application was used to visualize risk of bias assessments [9].

2.3. Statistical Analysis

For dichotomous data, we used odds ratios (OR) as the effect measure with 95% confidence intervals (CIs) and for continuous data we used mean differences (MD) with 95% CI. When the continuous outcome was reported in a study as median, range, and interquartile range, we estimated means and standard deviations using the formula described by Hozo et al. [10]. Heterogeneity was assessed statistically using $I^2$ (no heterogeneity, $I^2 = 0–25%$; moderate heterogeneity, $I^2 = 25–50%$; large heterogeneity, $I^2 = 50–75%$; extreme heterogeneity, $I^2 = 75–100%$). The random effects model was used for analyses [11]. All analyses were performed with the Review Manager software version 5.4 (Nordic Cochrane Centre, Cochrane Collaboration), and Stata software, version 15.0 (College Station, TX, USA). The significance level for all statistical tests was $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed).

3. Results

3.1. Eligible Studies and Study Characteristics

The literature search process identified 1022 studies (Figure 1). After excluding duplicate publications, reviews, meta-analyses, editorials, letters, abstracts and case reports, 72 studies were fully reviewed, and 41 were considered eligible for the meta-analysis [12–51]. The risk
of bias according to the authors of the present study was low for 32 studies, moderate for 10 studies (Figures S1–S4).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Eligible Studies and Study Characteristics

The literature search process identified 1,022 studies (Figure 1). After excluding duplicate publications, reviews, meta-analyses, editorials, letters, abstracts and case reports, 72 studies were fully reviewed, and 41 were considered eligible for the meta-analysis [12–51]. The risk of bias according to the authors of the present study was low for 32 studies, moderate for 10 studies (Figures S1–S4).

![Flowchart of study selection](image)

**Figure 1.** Database search and selection of studies according to PRISMA guidelines.

#### 3.2. Patient Characteristics

Detailed characteristics of the patients are presented in Tables 1 and S1. Mean age of patients in the RG and LG groups was 60.0 ± 16.1 and 62.2 ± 12.7 years, respectively (MD = −0.91; 95% CI: −1.79 to 0.02; p = 0.04). Men accounted for 66.5% of the RG group compared to the LG group where the percentage of men was 61.9% (OR = 1.16; 95% CI: 1.05 to 1.28; p = 0.003). American Society of Anesthesiologists Physical Status Classification ≥ III grade was concerned 16.9% of patients in RG group and 21.3% in LG group (OR = 0.86; 95% CI: 0.52 to 1.41; p = 0.55). In the RG group, neoadjuvant therapy was used statistically significantly more often than in the LG group (48.9% vs. 38.0%, respectively; OR = 1.67; 95% CI: 1.34 to 2.09; p < 0.001). Tumor distance from AV in the robotic (RG) and laparoscopic (LG) groups varied and amounted to 7.4 ± 3.5 vs. 8.5 ± 3.4 cm, respectively (MD = −0.72; 95% CI: −1.17 to −0.26; p < 0.001). A polled analysis of patients’ characteristics is presented in Table 2.
| Study                | Country    | Study Design | Robotic-Assisted Group | Laparoscopic Group |
|---------------------|------------|--------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| Ahmed et al. 2017   | Portugal   | PCD          | No. 99, Age 69 ± 2, Sex 71.7% | No. 85, Age 68 ± 2, Sex 68.2% |
| Aselmann et al. 2018| Germany    | R-PCD        | No. 44, Age 61.1 ± 11.5, Sex 59.1% | No. 41, Age 65.1 ± 12.0, Sex 58.5% |
| Askild et al. 2018  | Sweden     | RCS          | No. 72, Age 65.4 ± 10.4, Sex 59.7% | No. 47, Age 70.1 ± 12.0, Sex 44.7% |
| Baek et al. 2010    | Korea      | PCD          | No. 41, Age 65.6 ± 11.3, Sex 61.0% | No. 41, Age 64.4 ± 13.3, Sex 61.0% |
| Baek et al. 2012    | Korea      | PCD          | No. 154, Age 59.1 ± 12.2, Sex 68.2% | No. 150, Age 62.3 ± 10.9, Sex 72.7% |
| Baek et al. 2013    | Korea      | RS           | No. 47, Age 50.8 ± 12.9, Sex 66.0% | No. 37, Age 61.8 ± 12.8, Sex 75.7% |
| Baik et al. 2008    | Korea      | RCT          | No. 18, Age 57.3 ± 6.3, Sex 77.8% | No. 18, Age 62.0 ± 9.0, Sex 77.8% |
| Barnajian et al. 2014| USA        | RS           | No. 20, Age 62.5 ± 11, Sex 60.0% | No. 20, Age 61.3 ± 13, Sex 60.0% |
| Bedirli et al. 2015 | Turkey     | RS           | No. 35, Age 64.7 ± 8.5, Sex 68.6% | No. 28, Age 60.4 ± 7.1, Sex 67.9% |
| Bedrikovetski et al.2020| Thailand   | RS           | No. 117, Age 61 ± 9.3, Sex 63.2% | No. 1269, Age 62.5 ± 13.7, Sex 57.9% |
| Bianchi et al. 2010 | Italy      | PCD          | No. 25, Age 63.5 ± 9.3, Sex 72.0% | No. 25, Age 62.5 ± 13.7, Sex 68.0% |
| Bilgin et al. 2020  | USA        | R-PCD        | No. 72, Age 59.0 ± 11.1, Sex 58.3% | No. 44, Age 57.2 ± 13.3, Sex 75.0% |
| Chen et al. 2017    | Taiwan     | RS           | No. 4744, Sex NS | No. 5578, Sex NS |
| Cho et al. 2015     | Korea      | PCD          | No. 278, Age 57.4 ± 11.6, Sex 65.5% | No. 278, Age 58.3 ± 10.4, Sex 66.2% |
| Corrigan et al. 2018| International | RCT      | No. 237, Sex NS | No. 234, Sex NS |
| Crolla et al. 2018  | Netherland | RS           | No. 168, Age 67.0 ± 9.64, Sex 67.3% | No. 184, Age 68.1 ± 10.7, Sex 56.0% |
| D’Annibale et al. 2013| Italy      | RS           | No. 50, Age 66.0 ± 12.1, Sex 60.0% | No. 50, Age 65.7 ± 11.6, Sex 60.0% |
| de Jesus et al. 2016| Brazil     | PCD          | No. 59, Age 56.8 ± 14.7, Sex 61.0% | No. 41, Age 55.5 ± 16.7, Sex 58.0% |
| de’Angelis et al. 2020| France     | PCD          | No. 50, Age 64.4 ± 14.7, Sex 66.0% | No. 81, Age 55.5 ± 16.7, Sex 60.5% |
| Eken et al. 2018    | Turkey     | RS           | No. 100, Age 59 ± 11, Sex 60.0% | No. 78, Age 56 ± 13, Sex 65.0% |
| Feroci et al. 2016  | Italy      | RS           | No. 53, Age 64.5 ± 12.1, Sex 50.9% | No. 58, Age 61.3 ± 13.6, Sex 72.4% |
| Garfinkle et al. 2019| Canada     | RS           | No. 154, Age 61.9 ± 13.5, Sex 68.8% | No. 213, Age 63.8 ± 13.3, Sex 59.6% |
| Ishihara et al. 2018| Japan      | PCD          | No. 130, Age 61.3, Sex 58.0% | No. 234, Age 64.1, Sex 65.0% |
| Jayne et al. 2017   | UK         | RCT          | No. 237, Age 64.4 ± 11.0, Sex 67.9% | No. 234, Age 65.5 ± 11.9, Sex 67.9% |
| Kang 2013           | Korea      | PCD          | No. 165, Age 61.2 ± 11.4, Sex 63.0% | No. 165, Age 60.4 ± 11.8, Sex 58.8% |
| Kethman 2020        | USA        | Cohrot       | No. 192, Age 61.7, Sex 69.0% | No. 206, Age 62, Sex 63.4% |
| Kim 2012            | Korea      | PCD          | No. 30, Age 54.13 ± 8.52, Sex 60.0% | No. 39, Age 56.85 ± 11.14, Sex 51.3% |
| Kim 2016            | Korea      | PCD          | No. 33, Age 57.0 ± 9.6, Sex 69.7% | No. 66, Age 58.2 ± 9.8, Sex 69.7% |
| Kim 2018            | Korea      | RCT          | No. 66, Age 60.4 ± 9.7, Sex 77.3% | No. 73, Age 59.7 ± 11.7, Sex 71.2% |
| Law 2016            | China      | PCD          | No. 220, Age 63.5 ± 9.3, Sex 67.3% | No. 171, Age 63.3 ± 12.2, Sex 56.7% |
| Lim 2016            | Korea      | RS           | No. 74, Age 65.1 ± 12.4, Sex 67.6% | No. 64, Age 65.8 ± 11.1, Sex 71.9% |
| Liu 2019            | China      | RS           | No. 80, Age 62 ± 9.64, Sex 66.3% | No. 116, Age 59.57 ± 10.3, Sex 62.1% |
| Park 2011           | Korea      | PCD          | No. 52, Age 57.3 ± 12.3, Sex 53.8% | No. 123, Age 65.1 ± 10.3, Sex 56.9% |
| Patrick 2009        | Italy      | PCD          | No. 29, Age 68 ± 10, Sex 57.7% | No. 37, Age 69 ± 10, Sex 33.3% |
| Ramji 2016          | Canada     | RS           | No. 26, Age 62.1 ± 9.1, Sex 73% | No. 27, Age 63.7 ± 11.2, Sex 70.0% |
| Rouanet 2018        | France     | RS           | No. 200, Age 59.5 ± 10, Sex 65.5% | No. 200, Age 62 ± 8.5, Sex 68.0% |
| Shiomi 2016         | Japan      | RS           | No. 127, Age 62 ± 9.3, Sex 73.2% | No. 109, Age 654 ± 10, Sex 59.6% |
| Silva-Velazco 2017  | USA        | RS           | No. 66, Age 56 ± 13.8, Sex 75.8% | No. 118, Age 59.8 ± 9.8, Sex 55.9% |
| Sugoor 2018         | India      | PCD          | No. 100, Age 48.7 ± 15.3, Sex 76.0% | No. 113, Age 49.2 ± 14.6, Sex 61.1% |
| Valverde 2017       | France     | PCD          | No. 65, Age 67 ± 11, Sex 65.0% | No. 65, Age 65 ± 10, Sex 69.0% |
| Yamaguchi 2016      | Japan      | RS           | No. 203, Age 64.8 ± 10.8, Sex 69.0% | No. 239, Age 65.9 ± 10.8, Sex 64.4% |

Legend: NS = not specified; PCS = prospectively collected data; R-PCD = a retrospective analysis of prospectively collected data; RS = retrospective study.
Table 2. Polled analysis of patient characteristics among included trials.

| Outcome                  | No. of Studies | Events/Participants or Mean ± SD | Events | Heterogeneity between Trials | p-Value for Differences across Groups |
|--------------------------|----------------|----------------------------------|--------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
|                          |                | Robotic                         | Laparoscopic | OR or MD | 95% CI | p-Value | I² Statistic |
| Sex, male                | 39             | 2564/3858 (66.5%)               | 3345/5408 (61.9%) | 1.16   | 1.05 to 1.28 | 0.32 | 9% | 0.003 |
| Age                      | 37             | 60.0 ± 16.1                     | 62.2 ± 12.7 | −0.91  | −1.79 to 0.02 | <0.001 | 70% | 0.04 |
| BMI                      | 31             | 25.1 ± 4.9                      | 24.6 ± 4.3 | 0.14   | −0.22 to 0.49 | <0.001 | 78% | 0.45 |
| ASA score                |                |                                 |         |       |                   |          |
| 1 class                  | 27             | 603/2358 (25.6%)                | 884/3628 (24.4%) | 0.97   | 0.84 to 1.12 | 0.45 | 0% | 0.70 |
| 2 class                  | 27             | 1333/2358 (56.5%)               | 1878/3628 (51.8%) | 1.19   | 0.99 to 1.44 | 0.001 | 51% | 0.07 |
| 3 class                  | 27             | 385/2358 (16.3%)                | 735/3628 (20.3%) | 0.84   | 0.68 to 1.04 | 0.08 | 30% | 0.11 |
| 4 class                  | 27             | 13/2358 (1.6%)                  | 36/3628 (3.5%)   | 0.90   | 0.44 to 1.83 | 0.83 | 0% | 0.77 |
| Neoadjuvant therapy      | 21             | 1000/2046 (48.9%)               | 1347/3541 (38.0%) | 1.67   | 1.34 to 2.09 | 0.001 | 55% | <0.001 |
| Tumour distance from AV (cm) | 18     | 7.4 ± 3.5                      | 8.5 ± 3.4 | −0.72  | −1.17 to −0.26 | <0.001 | 79% | 0.002 |
| Tumour location          |                |                                 |         |       |                   |          |
| Upper rectum             | 10             | 203/1385 (14.7%)                | 476/2867 (16.6%) | 0.61   | 0.44 to 0.83 | 0.02 | 56% | 0.002 |
| Middle                   | 10             | 631/1385 (45.6%)                | 1254/2867 (43.7%) | 1.11   | 0.93 to 1.32 | 0.21 | 25% | 0.24 |
| Lower                    | 14             | 800/1919 (41.7%)                | 1334/3457 (38.6%) | 1.18   | 0.92 to 1.52 | <0.001 | 71% | 0.18 |

Legend: BMI = Body Mass index; CI = confidence interval; MD = mean difference; OR = odds ratio; SD = standard deviation. Note: Not all outcomes were reported in every study. “No. of studies” refers to the studies included in the analysis for the particular outcome.

3.3. Intraoperative Period Characteristics

Detailed characteristics of the data concerning the intraoperative period are presented in Table 3. Pooled analysis showed that Hartman surgery was performed statistically significantly less frequently in the RG group compared to LG (3.8% vs. 5.2%, respectively; OR = 0.55; 95% CI: 0.31 to 0.98; p = 0.04). The inverse relationship was observed for the intersphincteric resection (19.4% vs. 13.4%; OR = 1.61; 95% CI: 1.10 to 2.35; p = 0.01).

Thirty-four articles reported the duration of surgery. The polled analysis showed that operative time in the RG group was 297.4 ± 99.3 min compared to 339.5 ± 359.2 min in the LG group (MD = 43.49; 95% CI: 25.26 to 61.51; p < 0.001; Figure S5). Operations using RG in comparison with LG were also associated with a statistically significantly lower frequency of conversion of the procedure to open surgery (2.6% vs. 7.3%; OR = 0.35; 95% CI: 0.26 to 0.46; p < 0.001; Figures S6 and S7). Intraoperative blood loss assessed from 24 studies was 224 ± 327.6 mL for robotic and 210.7 ± 305.2 mL for laparoscopic surgery (OR = −0.94; 95% CI: −30.11 to 28.22, p < 0.001; Figure S8), with blood transfusion required in 3.7% cases and 2.1%, respectively.
### Table 3. Polled analysis of intraoperative parameters among included trials.

| Outcome                      | No. of Studies | Events/Participants or Mean ± SD | Events | Heterogeneity between Trials | p-Value for Differences across Groups |
|------------------------------|----------------|----------------------------------|--------|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
|                              |                | Robotic                          | Laparoscopic | OR or MD | 95% CI | p-Value | I² Statistic |
| Surgical procedure           |                |                                  |         |                 |           |         |             |
| Full TME                     | 4              | 124/285 (43.5%)                  | 99/246 (40.2%) | 1.37 | 0.36 to 5.26 | <0.001 | 84% | 0.64 |
| LAR                          | 21             | 1894/2569 (73.7%)                | 1996/2868 (69.6%) | 1.11 | 0.86 to 1.44 | <0.001 | 71% | 0.42 |
| APR                          | 15             | 252/1546 (16.3%)                 | 303/1558 (19.4%) | 0.88 | 0.62 to 1.25 | 0.01 | 51% | 0.47 |
| Hartman                      | 10             | 47/1241 (3.8%)                   | 76/1449 (5.2%) | 0.55 | 0.31 to 0.98 | 0.84 | 0% | 0.04 |
| ISR                          | 5              | 118/608 (19.4%)                  | 109/814 (13.4%) | 1.61 | 1.10 to 2.35 | 0.20 | 33% | 0.01 |
| Operative time (min)         | 34             | 297.4 ± 99.3                     | 339.5 ± 359.2 | 43.39 | 25.26 to 61.51 | <0.001 | 98% | <0.001 |
| Diverting ileostomy          | 16             | 1102/1831 (60.2%)                | 1016/1815 (56.0%) | 1.07 | 0.87 to 1.31 | 0.12 | 31% | 0.53 |
| Intraoperative blood loss (mL)| 24             | 224 ± 327.6                     | 210.7 ± 305.2 | −0.94 | −30.11 to 28.22 | <0.001 | 98% | 0.95 |
| Conversion to open           | 30             | 76/2917 (2.6%)                   | 236/3255 (7.3%) | 0.35 | 0.26 to 0.46 | 0.56 | 0% | <0.001 |
| Intraoperative complications  | 4              | 45/445 (10.1%)                   | 108/1599 (6.8%) | −0.00 | −0.03 to 0.02 | 0.64 | 0% | 0.76 |
| Haemorrhage                  | 3              | 7/327 (2.1%)                     | 12/328 (3.7%) | −0.01 | −0.05 to 0.03 | 0.16 | 46% | 0.78 |
| Transfusion                  | 3              | 6/162 (3.7%)                     | 6/285 (2.1%) | 0.02 | −0.01 to 0.05 | 0.95 | 0% | 0.32 |

Legend: APR = abdominoperineal resection; CI: confidence interval; ISR = intersphincteric resection; LAR = low anterior resection; MD = mean difference; OR = odds ratio; SD = standard deviation; TME = total mesorectal excision. Note: Not all outcomes were reported in every study. “No. of studies” refers to the studies included in the analysis for the particular outcome.

#### 3.4. Pathological Evaluation

A polled analysis of pathological evaluation is presented in Table 4. There were no statistically significant differences between RG and LG groups in terms of TNM stage, N stage or lymph nodes harvested (Figure S9; p > 0.05). Circumferential margin (CRM) was positive in 4.1% (97/2338) in robotic and 4.4% (159/3616) in laparoscopic group (OR = 0.88; 95% CI: 0.67 to 1.16, p = 0.5). In the RG group, statistically significantly smaller tumor sizes were observed than in the LG group (3.4 ± 1.9 vs. 3.7 ± 2.2 cm, respectively; MD = −0.24; 95% CI: −0.42 to 0.07; p = 0.006), as well as the distal resection of margin was shorter than in the LG group (2.7 ± 1.9 vs. 2.9 ± 2.3 cm; MD = −0.22; 95% CI: −0.32 to −0.11; p < 0.001).
Table 4. Polled analysis of pathological evaluation.

| Outcome                  | No. of Studies | Events/Participants or Mean ± SD | Events | Heterogeneity between Trials | p-Value for Differences across Groups |
|--------------------------|----------------|----------------------------------|--------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
|                          |                | Robotic                          | Laparoscopic | OR or MD | 95%CI | p-Value | I² Statistic |
| TNM stage                |                |                                  |         |                               |                                        |
| Stage I                  | 13             | 221/1169 (18.9%)                 | 265/2397 (11.1%) | 0.94 | 0.75 to 1.17 | 0.84 | 0% | 0.58 |
| Stage II                 | 11             | 237/986 (24.0%)                  | 226/1010 (22.4%) | 1.13 | 0.91 to 1.41 | 0.75 | 0% | 0.26 |
| Stage III                | 11             | 410/986 (41.6%)                  | 458/1010 (45.3%) | 0.86 | 0.71 to 1.04 | 0.88 | 0% | 0.12 |
| Stage IV                 | 3              | 6/117 (5.1%)                     | 6/125 (4.8%) | 1.11 | 0.31 to 3.94 | 0.38 | 0% | 0.87 |
| N stage                  |                |                                  |         |                               |                                        |
| N0                       | 16             | 1150/1829 (62.9%)                | 1252/3024 (41.4%) | 1.05 | 0.88 to 1.25 | 0.15 | 28% | 0.58 |
| N1                       | 15             | 423/1803 (23.5%)                 | 669/2997 (22.3%) | 1.04 | 0.86 to 1.25 | 0.17 | 26% | 0.67 |
| N2                       | 12             | 139/1494 (9.3%)                  | 247/2741 (9.0%) | 0.96 | 0.76 to 1.22 | 0.92 | 0% | 0.75 |
| Lymph nodes harvested    | 34             | 20.5 ± 12.2                     | 25.1 ± 25.2 | −0.05 | −1.06 to 0.96 | <0.001 | 85% | 0.92 |
| Positive lymph nodes     | 4              | 2.5 ± 3.4                       | 7.3 ± 6.1 | −1.42 | −4.53 to 1.69 | <0.001 | 98% | 0.37 |
| Tumour size (cm)         | 11             | 3.4 ± 1.9                       | 3.7 ± 2.2 | −0.24 | −0.42 to −0.07 | 0.37 | 7% | 0.006 |
| CRM (mm)                 | 7              | 9.8 ± 7.1                       | 8.8 ± 7.6 | 0.08 | −1.03 to 1.19 | 0.42 | 0% | 0.88 |
| CRM positive             | 22             | 97/2338 (4.1%)                  | 159/3616 (4.4%) | 0.88 | 0.67 to 1.16 | 0.50 | 0% | 0.36 |
| DRM (cm)                 | 20             | 2.7 ± 1.9                       | 2.9 ± 2.3 | −0.22 | −0.32 to −0.11 | <0.001 | 87% | <0.001 |
| DRM positive             | 4              | 3/286 (1.0%)                    | 3/343 (0.9%) | 0.97 | 0.21 to 4.46 | 0.44 | 0% | 0.96 |
| PRM (cm)                 | 7              | 12.6 ± 6.2                      | 13.0 ± 6.6 | 0.30 | −0.25 to 0.86 | 0.008 | 66% | 0.28 |
| Lymphovascular invasion  | 4              | 112/567 (19.8%)                 | 101/588 (17.2%) | 1.27 | 0.94 to 1.72 | 0.50 | 0% | 0.12 |

Legend: CI: confidence interval; CRM = Circumferential resection margin; DRM = Distal resection margin; MD = mean difference; OR = odds ratio; PRM = proximal resection margin; SD = standard deviation. Note: Not all outcomes were reported in every study. "No. of studies" refers to the studies included in the analysis for the particular outcome.

3.5. Outcomes Evaluation

Survival to hospital discharge or 30-day overall survival rate was reported in 19 trials and was 99.6% for RG and 98.8% for LG (OR = 2.10; 95% CI: 1.00 to 4.43; p = 0.05; Figure S10). However, the pooled analysis did not show any advantage of any of the methods (RG or LG) in terms of OAS for longer periods of time (Table 5). In addition, an analysis was carried out in subgroups depending on the region of the study, which showed that the equals in SHD between RG and LG groups were respectively: for Europe 98.6% vs. 97.9% (OR = 1.43; 95%CI: 0.64 to 3.18; p = 0.38), for Asia 99.9% vs. 98.9% (OR = 4.28; 95%CI: 0.95 to 19.16; p = 0.06), and for North America 98.2% vs. 98.0% (OR = 1.6; 95%CI: 0.49 to 5.28; p = 0.44).
Table 5. Polled analysis of outcomes among included trials.

| Outcome                        | No. of Studies | Events/Participants or Mean ± SD | Events | Heterogeneity between Trials | p-Value | I² Statistic | p-Value for Differences across Groups |
|--------------------------------|----------------|---------------------------------|--------|-------------------------------|---------|--------------|----------------------------------------|
|                                |                | Robotic                          | Laparoscopic | OR or MD             | 95%CI   | p-Value      |                                  |
|                                |                |                                  |         |                               |         |              |                                  |
| **Overall survival, OAS**      |                |                                 |         |                               |         |              |                                  |
| SHD/30—days                    | 18             | 6346/6369 (99.6%)               | 8219/8319 (98.8%) | 2.10 | 1.00 to 4.43 | 0.07     | 43%          | 0.05                                |
| 1—yr                           | 1              | 44/44 (100%)                     | 37/41 (90.3%) | 10.68 | 0.56 to 204.84 | NA       | NA           | 0.12                                |
| 3—yrs                          | 4              | 320/371 (86.3%)                 | 316/363 (87.1%) | 1.02 | 0.56 to 1.83  | 0.21     | 34%          | 0.96                                |
| 5—yrs                          | 4              | 551/644 (85.6%)                 | 488/557 (87.6%) | 0.87 | 0.61 to 1.23  | 0.89     | 0%           | 0.43                                |
| **The disease—free survival rate, DFS** |            |                                 |         |                               |         |              |                                  |
| 1—yr                           | 1              | 41/44 (93.2%)                    | 32/41 (78.0%) | 3.84 | 0.96 to 15.37 | NA       | NA           | 0.06                                |
| 2—yrs                          | 3              | 131/171 (76.6%)                 | 121/163 (74.2%) | 1.15 | 0.65 to 2.04  | 0.29     | 20%          | 0.62                                |
| 3—yrs                          | 3              | 346/424 (81.6%)                 | 307/386 (79.5%) | 1.13 | 0.79 to 1.60  | 0.97     | 0%           | 0.51                                |
| 5—yrs                          | 1              | 138/154 (89.6%)                 | 135/165 (81.8%) | 1.14 | 0.64 to 2.01  | NA       | NA           | 0.66                                |
| **Time to liquid diet (days)** | 7              | 3.7 ± 2.4                       | 4.4 ± 2.6 | −0.58 | −1.50 to 0.33 | <0.001   | 95%          | 0.95                                |
| **Time to solid diet (days)**  | 9              | 4.4 ± 3.0                       | 5.1 ± 2.8 | −0.46 | −0.95 to 0.03 | <0.001   | 75%          | 0.07                                |
| **Time to flatus (days)**      | 13             | 2.5 ± 1.4                       | 2.9 ± 2.0 | −0.34 | −0.65 to −0.03 | <0.001   | 85%          | 0.03 *                              |
| **Time to bowel movement (days)** | 7              | 2.4 ± 1.9                       | 2.4 ± 1.7 | −0.06 | −0.25 to 0.13 | 0.49     | 0%           | 0.53                                |
| **Hospital length of stay (days)** | 34             | 8.0 ± 5.3                       | 9.5 ± 10.0 | −2.01 | −2.90 to −1.11 | <0.001   | 99%          | <0.001 *                            |
| **Readmission rate**           | 11             | 91/882 (10.3%)                  | 203/2066 (9.8%) | 1.14 | 0.82 to 1.60  | 0.38     | 6%           | 0.44                                |
| **Reoperation rate**           | 13             | 67/1061 (6.3%)                  | 80/1120 (7.1%) | 0.87 | 0.61 to 1.25  | 0.47     | 0%           | 0.46                                |
| **Adverse events**             |                |                                 |         |                               |         |              |                                  |
| Overall, 30—days complications | 18             | 685/2520 (27.2%)                | 1453/7639 (19.0%) | 1.11 | 0.80 to 1.55  | <0.001   | 84%          | 0.53                                |
| Anastomotic leakage            | 28             | 135/2607 (5.2%)                 | 208/4097 (5.1%) | 0.84 | 0.65 to 1.07  | 0.66     | 0%           | 0.16                                |
| Anastomotic bleeding           | 4              | 10/405 (2.5%)                   | 9/416 (2.2%) | 1.17 | 0.46 to 2.98  | 0.91     | 0%           | 0.75                                |
| Parastomal/trocar hernia       | 3              | 45/1081 (4.2%)                  | 189/4943 (3.8%) | 1.23 | 0.88 to 1.73  | 0.65     | 0%           | 0.23                                |
| Urinary retention              | 12             | 51/1455 (3.5%)                  | 96/1560 (6.1%) | 0.56 | 0.34 to 0.92  | 0.13     | 33%          | 0.02 *                              |
| Urinary tract infection        | 6              | 12/673 (1.8%)                   | 26/839 (3.1%) | 0.62 | 0.30 to 1.27  | 0.74     | 0%           | 0.19                                |
The disease-free survival rate indicated a slight advantage of the robotic-assisted technique over the standard laparoscopic technique in all follow-up periods; however, these differences did not prove statistically significant.

Time to first flatus in the RG group was 2.5 ± 1.4 days and was statistically significantly shorter than in LG group (2.9 ± 2.0 days; MD = −0.34; 95% CI: −0.65 to 0.03; p = 0.03). In the case of time to a liquid diet, solid diet and bowel movement, the analysis showed no statistically significant differences (p > 0.05).

Length of hospital stay was reported in 34 studies. The polled analysis showed that the mean duration of hospital stay in the RG vs. LG group varied and amounted to 8.0 ± 5.3 vs. 9.5 ± 10.0 days (MD = −2.01; 95%CI: −2.90 to −1.11; p < 0.001; Figure S11).

| Outcome                  | No. of Studies | Events/Participants or Mean ± SD | Events | Heterogeneity between Trials | p-Value for Differences across Groups |
|--------------------------|----------------|---------------------------------|--------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
|                          |                | Robotic                         | Laparoscopic | OR or MD | 95% CI | p-Value | I² Statistic |                      |
| Ureteral injury          | 3              | 0/253 (0.0%)                    | 4/243 (1.6%) | 0.25     | 0.04 to 1.56 | 0.97     | 0%           | 0.14                  |
| Bowel obstruction        | 5              | 28/549 (5.1%)                   | 48/1750 (2.7%) | 1.78     | 1.05 to 3.03 | 0.55     | 0%           | 0.03 *                |
| Small bowel perforation  | 5              | 4/826 (0.5%)                    | 14/876 (1.6%) | 0.39     | 0.14 to 1.11 | 0.77     | 0%           | 0.08                  |
| Wound infection          | 22             | 130/7048 (1.8%)                 | 229/9299 (2.5%) | 0.79     | 0.62 to 1.00 | 0.66     | 0%           | 0.05                  |
| Sepsis                   | 4              | 10/381 (2.6%)                   | 99/1644 (6.0%) | 0.79     | 0.39 to 1.59 | 0.65     | 0%           | 0.51                  |
| Wound dehiscence         | 5              | 5/444 (1.1%)                    | 35/1714 (2.0%) | 1.04     | 0.25 to 4.42 | 0.28     | 22%          | 0.96                  |
| Abdominal bleeding       | 12             | 16/2052 (0.8%)                  | 144/6015 (2.4%) | 0.85     | 0.30 to 2.35 | 0.03     | 49%          | 0.75                  |
| Ileus                    | 19             | 787/6363 (12.4%)                | 1221/8637 (14.1%) | 0.94     | 0.77 to 1.14 | 0.32     | 11%          | 0.51                  |
| Abdominal abscess        | 8              | 14/911 (1.5%)                   | 15/984 (1.5%) | 0.90     | 0.43 to 1.91 | 0.84     | 0%           | 0.79                  |
| Pelvic abscess           | 3              | 10/251 (4.0%)                   | 10/303 (3.3%) | 1.20     | 0.40 to 3.65 | 0.32     | 12%          | 0.74                  |
| Fistula                  | 5              | 22/784 (2.8%)                   | 13/762 (1.7%) | 1.66     | 0.83 to 3.33 | 0.73     | 0%           | 0.15                  |
| Pulmonary embolism       | 3              | 1/261 (0.4%)                    | 2/372 (0.5%) | 0.75     | 0.09 to 6.15 | 0.50     | 0%           | 0.79                  |
| Deep vein thrombosis     | 3              | 4/440 (0.9%)                    | 3/502 (0.6%) | 1.86     | 0.24 to 14.26 | 0.25     | 27%          | 0.55                  |
| Acute renal failure      | 5              | 1/351 (0.3%)                    | 5/526 (1.0%) | 0.62     | 0.15 to 2.57 | 0.82     | 0%           | 0.51                  |
| Acute renal failure      | 6              | 34/1223 (2.8%)                  | 210/5263 (4.0%) | 0.85     | 0.59 to 1.22 | 0.89     | 0%           | 0.38                  |
| Peripheral nerve injury  | 1              | 0/66 (0.0%)                     | 0/118 (0.0%) | NE       | NE         | NA       | NA           | NA                    |

Legend: CI: confidence interval; MD = mean difference; NA = not applicable; NE = not estimable; OR = odds ratio; SD = standard deviation. Note: Not all outcomes were reported in every study. “No. of studies” refers to the studies included in the analysis for the particular outcome. * p < 0.05 statistically significant.
Surgery with robotic-assisted technique compared to standard laparoscopic technique was associated with a statistically significantly lower risk of the urinary retention (3.5% vs. 6.1%, respectively; OR = 0.56; 95% CI: 0.34 to 0.92; p = 0.02; Figure S12). However, in the case of bowel obstruction, an inverse relationship was observed between RG and LG (5.1% vs. 2.7%; OR = 1.78; 95% CI: 1.05 to 3.03; p = 0.03; Figure S13). In the case of the remaining adverse events listed in Table 5, no statistically significant differences between the assessed surgical techniques were observed. Anastomotic leakage risk was comparable, estimated as 5.2% for robotic vs. 5.1% for laparoscopic surgery (OR 0.84; 95% CI: 0.65 to 1.07; p = 0.16; Figure S14).

4. Discussion

In our meta-analysis, we obtained new data based on the most recent literature. The survival to hospital discharge or 30-day overall survival rate was better in the RG than in the LG group (99.7% vs. 99.0%). Time to first flatus in the RG group was 2.5 ± 1.4 days and was statistically significantly shorter than in LG group (2.9 ± 2.0 days). We have also analyzed time to a liquid diet, solid diet and bowel movement, but no statistically significant differences were detected. Length of hospital stay in the RG was shorter compared to LG group (8.0 ± 5.3 vs. 9.5 ± 10.0 days).

Robot-assisted surgery of rectal cancer patients has been believed to overcome some of the difficulties present during the laparoscopic approach and thus improve its effectiveness. Better binocular vision with a three-dimensional view, wristed tools with better manoeuvrability, lack of tremor were enabling more exact operating in narrow pelvic space should improve the quality of specimen (intact mesorectal fascia and thus higher radicalness) and ensure saving anatomic structures essential to avoid adverse events. All those improvements should potentially lead to achieving the two most important goals in treating patients with cancer: better overall survival and higher quality of life.

Although some of the aspects analyzed in different studies show the robotic approach as superior to the laparoscopic one, overall survival has not been changed in favour of robotic-assisted surgery of the rectum. Our meta-analysis shown equivalent 5-years survival (85.6% for robotic and 87.6% for laparoscopic approach, p = 0.89). Interestingly, some data concerning pathologic aspects of the specimen, favouring individual methods (i.e., circumferential margin broader following robotic surgery 9.8 ± 7.1 vs. 8.8 ± 7.6, p = 0.42, but the almost equal ratio of positive CRM (4.1% and 4.4% respectively, p = 0.5). Thus R-TME is considered oncologically safe, as well as L-TME and open surgery, and different studies support the evidence [5,52–56].

These findings are contrary to the number of harvested lymph nodes, higher at laparoscopic approach (25.1 ± 25.2 vs. 20.5 ± 12.2, p < 0.001 with positive lymph nodes 7.3 ± 6.1 after laparoscopic resection and 2.5 ± 3.4 after robotic one, p < 0.001). Since the quality of surgical specimen can predict prognosis [57], all the differences should alter survival. However, all aspects mentioned above did not impact OS.

Although survival is shown to be the same at patients operated with analyzed tools, other essential advantages of robot-assisted surgery are shown in the meta-analysis, like lower urinary retention, lower urinary infection or ileus. Hospital stay was shorter in the R-TME group.

Some other benefits were assessed in some, not numerous studies, concerning the quality of life. Precise operating with better visibility gained with a three-dimensional view and wristed tools allow meticulous and sharp preparation of the hypogastric nerves and splanchnic plexus. This aspect of rectal surgery has been already improved by implementing Total Mesorectal Excision [1], in contrast to former blunt resection, in a study published by Kim et al. [38]. Although being a vast element of activity, genitourinary functions after R-TME has not been widely analyzed. Comparison of sexual functions according to international prostate symptom score (IPSS) showed the difference after three months (p = 0.036) following surgery favourable for R-TME (stronger sexual desire and better erectile functions) and equalization after six months. There was also earlier recovery.
concerning bladder functions after three months in the R-TME group, with stable voiding volume even right after the operation. The authors indicate adequate counter traction strength obtained through enhanced dexterity as an explanation of the results.

Enter et al. described the effects of TME performed at patients with low rectal tumours, operated using abdominoperineal resection (APR) describe the ratio of patients who maintained sexual functions as 57% compared to those operated with sphincter preservation (control group, 85%) [58]. They also indicate the OS worse than in the control group (60% vs. 81%). It is worth noting that a proven-value tool provides better circumferential margin and significantly better OS, equal to survival following anterior resection: ASAR (abdominal-sacral amputation of the rectum), described by Bebenek et al. [59]. Shiomi et al. showed the advantages of R-TME in especially challenging cases of lower rectal cancer in patients with visceral obesity. The complication rate, blood loss and hospital stay in patients with visceral obesity were significantly lower after R-TME than the laparoscopic approach. Operation time and pathologic results were similar in both groups, despite of high volume of visceral fat distorting surgical excision planes and leading to different complications [47]. The results of the meta-analysis show robotic-assisted rectal surgery as equally effective to the laparoscopic approach. Although more advanced, robotic-assisted rectal surgery does not influence overall survival. However, there are some benefits to using a higher quality of life, lower rates of sexual malfunctions in the period close to operation and better performance in, especially challenging situations.

**Limitations**

Presented meta-analysis encompassed different types of publications, like randomized trials with patients matched according to different variables and single surgeons experience. Randomization on a 1:1 basis was strictly kept in randomized parallel-group trials like ROLARR [35] but was absent in single centre-experience, where the rates of preoperative chemoradiation were 43.2 vs. 19.5 [13]. Moreover, some more difficult cases were treated with robotic surgery due to subjective feeling of the outcome improvement following such approach shared by the authors. This could concern lower rectal localizations and more advanced stages demanding neoadjuvant treatment. Preoperative chemoradiation allows tumour downstaging and thus enables facilitated surgery. On the other hand, neoadjuvant treatment may also lead to oedema and fibrotic changes of irradiated tissues, making preparation more difficult and increasing smoke development and emission of fluid during surgery [13]. Some studies show more favourable outcomes following a robotic surgery, superior to laparoscopic at patients with unfavourable characteristics, i.e., neoadjuvant chemoradiation [29,60]. All those factors may influence the choice of procedure, either robotic or laparoscopic, across analyzed studies. This may lead to the different statistical distribution of patients using neoadjuvant treatment.

The compared techniques (RG and LG), apart from the differences in intraoperative parameters and outcomes demonstrated in the meta-analysis, also differ in their costs. The higher cost of the procedure in the case of RG and the cost of the device itself influence the lower availability of robotic-assisted surgery. As indicated by Siulva-Velazzco total cost of hospitalization of patients with RG is 15% higher than in patients operated with standard laparoscopic technique [48]. Ramji et al. [45] also indicate a significant increase in the cost of surgery with RG compared to LG, both in terms of operative room (123% increase in cost) and total cost per episode (59% increase in cost).

Robotic surgery has advantages in terms of the ergonomic design and expectations of shortening the learning curve, which may reduce the number of patients with adverse outcomes during a surgeon’s learning period [61]. Moreover, Jiménez-Rodríguez indicate that robotic advantages could have an impact on the learning curve for rectal cancer and lower the number of cases that are necessary for rectal resections [62]. Jiménez-Rodríguez et al. in another study shows that learning curve for robotic-assisted rectal cancer surgery is achieved after 21–23 cases [63] while as many studies indicate, a surgeon may become
experienced in laparoscopic-assisted rectal surgery by operating 16–20 patients with rectal cancer [64,65].

5. Conclusions

Robotic-assisted techniques provide several advantages over laparoscopic techniques in reducing operative time and significantly lower conversion of the procedure to open surgery and a shorter duration of hospital stay and risk of urinary risk retention, urinary tract infection or ileus improving survival to hospital discharge or 30-day overall survival rate.

Supplementary Materials: The following are available online at https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/cancers14010180/s1, Figure S1: A summary table of review authors’ judgements for each risk of bias item for each randomized study, Figure S2: A plot of the distribution of review authors’ judgements across randomized studies for each risk of bias item, Figure S3: A summary table of review authors’ judgements for each risk of bias item for each non-randomized study, Figure S4: A plot of the distribution of review authors’ judgements across non-randomized studies for each risk of bias item, Figure S5: Forest plot of operative time in the robotic-assisted and laparoscopic groups, Figure S6: Forest plot of conversion to open surgery rate in the robotic-assisted and laparoscopic groups, Figure S7: Funnel plot with 95% confidence limits for publication bias in the studies investigating: (A) conversion to open surgery, (B) survival to hospital discharge, (C) urinary retention occurrence, (D) anastomotic leakage occurrence, Figure S8: Forest plot of intraoperative blood loss in the robotic-assisted and laparoscopic groups, Figure S9: Forest plot of lymph nodes harvested in the robotic-assisted and laparoscopic groups, Figure S10: Forest plot of survival to hospital discharge in the robotic-assisted and laparoscopic groups, Figure S11: Forest plot of hospital length of stay in the robotic-assisted and laparoscopic groups, Figure S12: Forest plot of urinary retention rate in the robotic-assisted and laparoscopic groups, Figure S13: Forest plot of bowel obstruction rate in the robotic-assisted and laparoscopic groups, Figure S14: Forest plot of anastomotic leakage rate in the robotic-assisted and laparoscopic groups, Table S1: PRISMA checklist.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, K.S. and L.S.; methodology, K.S. and L.S.; software, L.S.; validation, K.S., L.S., J.S.; formal analysis, K.S. and L.S.; investigation, K.S., L.S., J.S. and M.P.; resources, L.S.; data curation, K.S. and L.S.; writing—original draft preparation, K.S., L.S. and R.T.; writing—review and editing, M.K., M.J., A.T., L.S., J.S., M.P., R.T. and K.S.; visualization, L.S.; supervision, L.S. and K.S.; project administration, K.S. and L.S.; funding acquisition, J.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: Research Grant of Wroclaw Medical University (SUB.E080.21.003).

Acknowledgments: The study was supported by the Polish Society of Disaster Medicine.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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