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Research note

Outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 B.1.617.2 (delta) variant in a nursing home 28 weeks after two doses of mRNA anti-COVID-19 vaccines: evidence of a waning immunity

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Abstract

Objectives: To describe a severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) B.1.617.2 (Delta) variant outbreak among residents (n = 69) and health workers (n = 69) of a small nursing home in northeastern Italy, with full vaccination coverage of 91% and 82%, respectively. Evaluation of the anti-Spike IgG titres 28 weeks after the mRNA vaccine booster dose against SARS-CoV-2 infection and severe coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).

Materials and methods: Sera were collected within 48 hours from the index case; anti-Spike IgG was determined (expressed as WHO binding antibody units (BAU)/mL) through a commercial quantitative assay; SARS-CoV-2 was diagnosed using RT-PCR, and full-genome sequencing was performed for lineage characterization. Residents were grouped according to anti-Spike IgG titres (≤ 50, 51–1000 and > 1000 BAU/mL) and the resulting protection against infection and severe disease was measured.

Results: None of the health workers and 14 of the 59 (24%) residents fully vaccinated and without a previous SARS-CoV-2 infection showed anti-Spike IgG ≤ 50 BAU/mL (one-sided Fisher exact test, p 0.011). Among these residents, a level of anti-Spike IgG ≤ 50 BAU/mL resulted in a higher risk of SARS-CoV-2 infection (relative risk 1.55, 95% CI 1.17–2.05) and severe COVID-19 (relative risk 5.33, 95% CI 1.83–15.57).

Conclusion: Low levels of SARS-CoV-2 neutralizing anti-Spike IgG in serum 28 weeks after the administration of the second dose parallel the waning of vaccine protection. Alice Pierobon, Clin Microbiol Infect 2022;28:614.e5–614.e7

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Materials and methods

On 25 August 2021, a healthcare worker (HCW) tested positive to routine checks performed using a microfluidic immunofluorescence assay for the qualitative detection of nucleocapsid antigens (LumiraDX SARS-CoV-2 Ag).

Immediately, all residents and the nursery staff were screened with the same assay, and 12 additional residents and five HCWs tested positive. Within the next 48 hours, confirmatory molecular RT-PCR tests of nasopharyngeal swabs were carried out among all residents and HCW and ten swabs were sent to the accredited laboratory of Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale delle Venezie for SARS-CoV-2 B.1.617.2 lineage characterization via Illumina MiSeq platform. At the same time, blood samples were drawn from residents and a sample of HCWs, for the determination of both the anti-Spike IgM and IgG in sera (Abbott SARS-CoV-2 IgG II Quant Assay). IgG results were expressed in WHO binding antibody units (BAU) per mL, using the manufacturer’s conversion factors, based on the WHO International Standard Anti-SARS-CoV-2 Immunoglobulin (NIBSC code 20-136) [5]. Testing was carried out at the Local Health Unit (ULSS 7 Pedemontana) analytical laboratory, under quality assurance/quality control. The following two conventional threshold levels of anti-Spike IgG were adopted: ≤50 BAU/mL and >1000 BAU/mL.

The outbreak lasted from 25 August to 6 October 2021, 10 days after the last SARS-CoV-2 infection. Affected residents were grouped as follows: (a) Asymptomatic: including <38°C fever or headache; (b) Symptomatic: >38°C fever, cough, diarrhoea, anorexia, lethargy, psychomotor retardation, mental confusion; and (c) Severe: dyspnoea, desaturation <92% leading to fatal outcomes. Previous immune stimuli were considered: doses of mRNA coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) vaccination received within 8 months from the last negative PCR test, were not recorded as fatal COVID-19 cases.

The anti-Spike IgG geometric mean was 161 BAU/mL (95% CI 98–268 BAU/mL) and 625 BAU/mL (95% CI 289–1353 BAU/mL) among tested residents (66/69) and HCWs (23/66), respectively; comparison of residents aged ≤80 years with those aged >80 years showed a geometric mean of 585 BAU/mL (95% CI 263–1300 BAU/mL) and 103 BAU/mL (95% CI 58–186 BAU/mL), respectively.

Among tested fully vaccinated individuals without previous SARS-CoV-2 infection, 0/20 HCWs, but 14/59 (24%) tested residents had anti-Spike IgG ≤50 BAU/mL (one-sided Fisher exact p 0.011).

For these residents, the elapsed time since the booster dose at the onset of the outbreak was 199 days (interdecile range 154–209 days), and an anti-Spike IgG titre ≤50 BAU/mL resulted in a higher risk of SARS-CoV-2 infection (RR 1.55, 95% CI 1.17–2.05) and severe COVID-19 (RR 5.33, 95% CI 1.83–15.57) (Table 1, Fig. 1). In terms of VE, the corresponding figures against SARS-CoV-2 infection and severe COVID-19 were 35% (95% CI 15%–51%) and 79% (95% CI 37%–93%), respectively; similar results were obtained when including the unvaccinated (n = 2) and partially vaccinated (n = 3) residents into the comparison group (data not reported).

Discussion

One-quarter of the 59 fully vaccinated nursing home residents with no previous SARS-CoV-2 infection had anti-Spike IgG ≤50 BAU/mL about 28 weeks after the booster dose. This translates to a VE of 35% (95% CI 15%–51%) against infection and 79% (95% CI 37%–93%) against severe COVID-19, suggesting that the protection conferred from an anti-Spike IgG titre ≤50 BAU/mL is very low, if any.

Table 1

| Anti-Spike IgG | SARS-CoV-2 | COVID-19 | Total |
|---------------|------------|----------|-------|
| >50 BAU/mL    | Negative   | Asymptomatic | Symptomatic | Severe |
| No            | 1 (7%)     | 3 (21%)   | 4 (29%)  | 6 (43%)  | 14 (100%) |
| Yes           | 18 (40%)   | 9 (20%)   | 14 (31%) | 4 (9%)   | 45 (100%) |
| Total         | 19 (32%)   | 12 (20%)  | 18 (31%) | 10 (17%) | 59 (100%) |

Abbreviations: BAU, WHO binding antibody units; COVID-19, coronavirus disease 2019; SARS-CoV-2, severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2. Fisher exact test: p = 0.012.
A large US CDC study carried out among 3862 nursing home residents fully vaccinated with mRNA vaccines reports a VE against SARS-CoV-2 infection of 53% (95% CI 49%–57%) comparing post-Delta (2 June to 1 August 2021) with pre-Delta period [6]. Otherwise, a nationwide UK study computed a VE of 71% (95% CI 41%–86%) against hospitalization with Delta infection among clinically extremely vulnerable >65-year-old individuals 20- weeks after the BNT162B2 boost [7].

In its Rapid Risk Assessment on COVID-19 outbreaks in long-term care facilities, the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control reported 2/18 VOC Delta outbreaks until July 2021, with 63 fully vaccinated and 12 partially vaccinated or unvaccinated residents. The reported attack rate among fully vaccinated residents is 31/63 (49%), with 5/63 (8%) COVID-19 hospitalizations [4]. These figures are somewhat lower in comparison with our study, which also shows a higher vaccination coverage among residents and HCWs; which is probably the result of differences in time elapsed since the booster dose.

To this purpose, a recent study evaluated anti-Spike immunoglobulin titre among 472 long-term care facility residents with Elecsys Anti-SARS-CoV-2 S Assay (April–May 2021), 64 days (interquartile range 63–65 days) from the BNT162b2 booster dose. The high, medium, low and null titre groups (>1000, 101–1000, 1–100 and < 1 BAU/mL) showed frequencies of 62%, 22%, 16% and 4%, respectively. The risk of being a non-responder was eight times higher in individuals with no previous SARS-CoV-2 infection (about 30% of the tested residents) [1]. In the present case study, only 5 (7%) residents had a previous SARS-CoV-2 infection in the pre-Delta period; none of them became infected during the outbreak described in this study.

To conclude, this study first reports a VOC Delta outbreak in an Italian Nursing Home [8,9]; the extensive and timely measurement of anti-Spike IgG among residents provides valuable immunological information. As a result of the small size of the study and the limits of our observations, further research is needed to define appropriate threshold anti-Spike IgG levels to identify and best protect those residents at higher risk of severe COVID-19 from VOC Delta lineages.

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AA, FR, LV, ADC and MS conceptualized the study; AA, AP, MEDA, MG and ADZ performed the investigations; formal analysis was by AP, ADZ and MS; the manuscript was written by GB; and MS supervised the study.

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