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Is re-introducing major open and minimally invasive surgery during COVID-19 safe for patients and healthcare workers? An international, multi-centre cohort study in the field of oesophago-gastric surgery

Mohamed Alasmar, Afsana Kausar, Alexander Borgstein, Johnny Moons, Sophie Doran, Stefano de Pascale, Rafael Restrepo, Apollonia Verrengia, Mariella Alloggio, Ana Moro Delgado, Ismael Díez del Val, Sacheen Kumar, Simone Giocapuzzi, Gian Luca Baiocchi, Marta de Vega Irañeta, Gabriel Salcedo, Peter Vorwald, Uberto Fumagalli Romario, Philippe Nafteux, Suzanne Gisbertz, Asif Chaudry, Bilal Alkhaffaf

Salford Royal Hospital, Manchester and University of Manchester, Manchester

Corresponding Author: Dr. Afsana Kausar (afsana-k@hotmail.com)

Introduction: The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in unprecedented and challenging changes to surgical practice, especially with the suspension of cancer surgery. There have been concerns regarding Covid-19 risk and infection to patients and healthcare workers, during major complex open surgical intervention, especially with minimally invasive surgery. This study examines the COVID-19 related risks to patients and healthcare workers following the re-introduction of major oesophago-gastric (OG) surgery.

Methods: This was an international, multi-centre, cohort study of open and minimally invasive oesophagectomy and gastrectomy procedures in specialist Upper GI centres, over a consecutive period of two months. Patients were recruited from nine European centres serving regions with a high population incidence of COVID-19 infections. 30-day operative morbidity and mortality data was collected for patients. All staff involved in the operative care of patients, were invited to complete a health-related survey.

Results: A total of 158 patients were included in the study (71 oesophagectomy, 82 gastrectomy), of which 87 patients (57%) underwent minimally invasive surgery (59 esophagectomy, 28 gastrectomy). A total of 403 staff were eligible for inclusion of which 313 (78%) completed the health survey. Non-standardised precautions to minimise against the risks of COVID for patients and staff were implemented at the centres. There were no cases of Covid-19 among patients in the post-operative period, however, two healthcare workers developed self-limiting COVID infection.

Conclusion: Precautions to minimise COVID-19 infection risk to healthcare staff and patients, have allowed the safe and successful reintroduction of major open and minimally invasive OG surgery.