

Communication

# Impaired Humoral Response in Renal Transplant Recipients to SARS-CoV-2 Vaccination with BNT162b2 (Pfizer-BioNTech)

Johannes Korth <sup>1,\*</sup>, Michael Jahn <sup>1,†</sup>, Oliver Dorsch <sup>2</sup>, Olympia Evdoxia Anastasiou <sup>3</sup>, Burkhard Sorge-Hädicke <sup>4</sup>, Ute Eisenberger <sup>1</sup>, Anja Gäckler <sup>1</sup>, Ulf Dittmer <sup>3</sup>, Oliver Witzke <sup>5</sup>, Benjamin Wilde <sup>1</sup>, Sebastian Dolff <sup>5,‡</sup> and Andreas Kribben <sup>1,‡</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> Department of Nephrology, University Hospital Essen, University of Duisburg-Essen, Hufelandstr. 55, 45147 Essen, Germany; michael.jahn@uk-essen.de (M.J.); ute.eisenberger@uk-essen.de (U.E.); anja.gackler@uk-essen.de (A.G.); Benjamin.wilde@uk-essen.de (B.W.); andreas.kribben@uk-essen.de (A.K.)
- <sup>2</sup> KfH Kuratorium für Dialyse und Nierentransplantation e.V, KfH-Nierenzentrum Friesener Straße 37a, 96317 Kronach, Germany; oliver.dorsch@kfh.de
- <sup>3</sup> Institute for Virology, University Hospital Essen, University of Duisburg-Essen, Virchowstr. 179, 45147 Essen, Germany; olympiaevdoxia.anastasiou@uk-essen.de (O.E.A.); ulf.dittmer@uk-essen.de (U.D.)
- <sup>4</sup> KfH Kuratorium für Dialyse und Nierentransplantation e.V, KfH-Nierenzentrum Alfried-Krupp-Str. 43, 45131 Essen, Germany; burkhard.sorge-haedicke@kfh-dialyse.de
- <sup>5</sup> Department of Infectious Diseases, West German Centre of Infectious Diseases, University Hospital Essen, University of Duisburg-Essen, Hufelandstr. 55, 45147 Essen, Germany; oliver.witzke@uk-essen.de (O.W.); sebastian.dolff@uk-essen.de (S.D.)
- \* Correspondence: johannes.korth@uk-essen.de; Tel.: +49-201-723-84622
- † These authors contributed equally to this work.
- ‡ shared last author.



**Citation:** Korth, J.; Jahn, M.; Dorsch, O.; Anastasiou, O.E.; Sorge-Hädicke, B.; Eisenberger, U.; Gäckler, A.; Dittmer, U.; Witzke, O.; Wilde, B.; et al. Impaired Humoral Response in Renal Transplant Recipients to SARS-CoV-2 Vaccination with BNT162b2 (Pfizer-BioNTech). *Viruses* **2021**, *13*, 756. <https://doi.org/10.3390/v13050756>

Academic Editor: Oscar R. Burrone

Received: 19 March 2021

Accepted: 22 April 2021

Published: 25 April 2021

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**Abstract:** The severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) has a major impact on transplant recipients, with mortality rates up to 20%. Therefore, the effect of established messenger RNA (mRNA)-based SARS-CoV-2 vaccines have to be evaluated for solid organ transplant patients (SOT) since they are known to have poor responses after vaccination. We investigated the SARS-CoV-2 immune response via SARS-CoV-2 IgG detection in 23 renal transplant recipients after two doses of the mRNA-based SARS-CoV-2 vaccine BNT162b2 following the standard protocol. The antibody response was evaluated once with an anti-SARS-CoV-2 IgG CLIA 15.8 +/- 3.0 days after the second dose. As a control, SARS-CoV-2 IgG was determined in 23 healthcare workers (HCW) and compared to the patient cohort. Only 5 of 23 (22%) renal transplant recipients were tested positive for SARS-CoV-2 IgG antibodies after the second dose of vaccine. In contrast, all 23 (100%) HCWs were tested positive for antibodies after the second dose. Thus, the humoral response of renal transplant recipients after two doses of the mRNA-based vaccine BNT162b2 (Pfizer-BioNTech, Kronach, Germany) is impaired and significantly lower compared to healthy controls (22% vs. 100%;  $p = 0.0001$ ). Individual vaccination strategies might be beneficial in these vulnerable patients.

**Keywords:** SARS-Cov-2 vaccination; renal transplant recipients; renal transplantation; COVID-19

## 1. Introduction

The novel severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) is a major threat to solid organ transplant recipients (SOT) with a mortality rate of up to 20% [1,2]. Currently there is a lack in efficient treatment options [3]. New messenger RNA (mRNA)-based SARS-CoV-2 vaccines were evaluated in over 70,000 individuals and found to have an efficacy of 95% in phase 3 placebo-controlled trials [4,5]. Since December 2020, the European union approved the first mRNA-based SARS-CoV-2 vaccine of Pfizer-BioNTech (<https://www.pei.de/DE/home/home-node.html>, accessed on 21 December 2020). Immunocompromised patients, like SOT recipients were not included in the large phase 3 trials, and therefore, efficacy data are lacking. However, vaccination is recommended

for SOT patients in Germany [6,7]. The current study evaluates the immune response of 23 renal transplant recipients after standard vaccination protocol with two vaccinations with the mRNA-based SARS-CoV-2 vaccine BNT162b2 (Pfizer-BioNTech, Nierenzentrum Kronach) in January and February 2021 by SARS-CoV-2 IgG development. The results were compared to the antibody response of 23 healthcare workers vaccinated using the same standard protocol with the same vaccine [8].

## 2. Materials and Methods

Twenty-three renal transplant recipients of the Nierenzentrum Kronach, Germany were intramuscularly vaccinated twice with a gap of  $22.0 \pm 4.6$  days between the shots with the mRNA-based SARS-CoV-2 vaccine BNT162b2 (Pfizer-BioNTech) according to the standard protocol at a vaccination center in Kronach, Germany [9]. Fourteen days after the second vaccination serum samples were tested for SARS-CoV-2 IgG against the Spike glycoprotein using an approved anti-SARS-CoV-2 IgG CLIA (LIAISON<sup>®</sup> SARS-CoV-2 TrimericS IgG assay, Diasorin, Saluggia, Italy). According to the manufacturer's recommendations for the Chemiluminescence Enzyme Immunoassays (CLIA), an Arbitrary Units per milliliter (AU/mL) ratio of  $<13.0$  was considered to be negative and  $\geq 13.0$  to be positive. A conversion of AU/mL to binding antibody units (BAU/mL) that correlate with the WHO standard is possible using the following equation:  $\text{BAU/mL} = 2.6 \times \text{AU/mL}$ . 800.0 AU/mL (2080 BAU/mL) is the upper limit of quantification without dilution of the CLIA.

In addition, the antibody response was compared to 23 healthcare workers after two intramuscular vaccinations at the University Hospital Essen in January 2021 with the same vaccination, sampling and testing protocol as the renal transplant recipients. The HCW received regular testing with teal-time PCR-assays for SARS-CoV-2 RNA from nasal swabs and had no clinical suspicion for SARS-CoV-2 infections throughout the preceding 12 months. Since the current study was focused on the humoral immune response in renal transplant patients, T-cell activity was not evaluated in this study. Fisher's exact test and Mann-Whitney U test was used to compare the results between groups.

## 3. Results

Of the 23 renal transplant recipients included in the study, none had a prior or current diagnosis of COVID-19. The mean age was  $57.7 \pm 13.5$  years. Twelve (52%) of the 23 patients were female and 11 (48%) were male. The mean time after renal transplantation was  $11.4 \pm 9.2$  years. The immunosuppressive regimen included mycophenolate (18 of 23; 78%), tacrolimus (14 of 23; 60%) and corticosteroids (14 of 23; 60%) (Table 1). None of the 23 HCW had a confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19 prior to the vaccination. The mean age was  $44.4 \pm 9.2$  years. Fourteen (61%) were female and 9 (39%) were male. Five of 23 (22%) renal transplant recipients tested positive for SARS-CoV-2 IgG at a mean of  $15.8 \pm 3.0$  days after the second dose of vaccine (Table 1). The mean SARS-CoV-2 IgG titer was  $50.9 \pm 138.7$  AU/mL.

All 23 (100%) HCW tested positive for SARS-CoV-2 IgG at a mean of  $13.7 \pm 1.8$  days after the second dose. The mean SARS-CoV-2 IgG titer was  $727.7 \pm 151.3$  AU/mL.

The immunosuppressive regimens in patients who tested positive and negative for SARS-CoV-2 IgG antibodies after vaccination were similar and there were no differences in age, gender and immunosuppressive drugs between these groups of patients (Table 2).

**Table 1.** Characteristics of patients after renal transplantation and healthcare workers after two doses of the mRNA-based SARS-CoV-2 vaccine BNT162b2. rtx renal transplant recipients; HCW, healthcare workers; n number; pos positive; neg negative; Ab antibody, CLIA Chemiluminescence Enzyme Immunoassays; AU Arbitrary Units; mL milliliter; Ab antibody.

	rtx	HCW	
n	23	23	<i>p</i>
female/male (n; %)	12 (52%)/11 (48%)	14 (61%)/9 (39%)	0.76
age (years)	57.7 +/- 13.5	44.4 +/- 9.2	0.0003
<b>immunosuppression (n)</b>			
mycophenolate n (%)	18, (78%)		
corticosteroids n (%)	14 (60%)		
tacrolimus n (%)	14 (60%)		
cyclosporine n (%)	4 (17%)	–	
sirolimus n (%)	5 (22%)		
everolimus n (%)	1 (4%)		
belatacept n (%)	1 (4%)		
azathioprine n (%)	1 (4%)		
years after rtx	11.4 +/- 9.2	–	
days between first and second dose (days)	22.0 +/- 4.6	22.0 +/- 0	
SARS-CoV-2 Ab detection after second dose (days)	15.8 +/- 3.0	13.7 +/- 1.8	
SARS-CoV-2 Ab posCLIA (n; %)	5 (22%)	23 (100%)	0.0001
SARS-CoV-2 Ab negCLIA (n; %)	18 (78%)	0 (0%)	
Ab SARS-COV-2 CLIA (AU/mL)	50.9 +/- 138.7	727.7 +/- 151.3	0.0001

**Table 2.** Characteristics of renal transplant recipients who tested positive and negative for SARS-CoV-2 IgG after two doses of the mRNA-based SARS-CoV-2 vaccine BNT162b2.

	SARS-CoV-2 IgG Positive	SARS-CoV-2 IgG Negative
n	5	18
female/male n (%)	3 (60%)/2 (40%)	9 (50%)/9 (50%)
age (years)	57.0 +/- 8.1	57.9 +/- 14.9
time after rtx (years)	17.6 +/- 7.7	9.7 +/- 9.1
mycophenolate n (%)	3 (60%)	15 (83%)
corticosteroids n (%)	3 (60%)	11 (61%)
tacrolimus n (%)	2 (40%)	12 (67%)
cyclosporine n (%)	2 (40%)	2 (11%)
sirolimus n (%)	1 (20%)	4 (22%)
everolimus n (%)	1 (20%)	0
betalacept n (%)	0	1 (6%)
azathioprine n (%)	0	1 (6%)
number of immunosuppressive drugs n (%)	2.4 +/- 0.5	2.6 +/- 0.5

The proportion of renal transplant recipients testing positive for antibodies after protocol-based vaccination was significantly lower in comparison to the control group of HCW (22% vs. 100%,  $p = 0.0001$ , Figure 1). In addition, the mean SARS-CoV-2 antibody titer of the renal transplant recipients was significantly lower in comparison to the HCW (50.9 +/- 138.7 AU/mL vs. 727.7 +/- 151.3 AU/mL,  $p = 0.0001$ ).



## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the detectable humoral immune response after standard protocol vaccination with two doses of the mRNA-based SARS-CoV-2 vaccine BNT162b2 in 22% of all renal transplant patients is poor. We suggest that renal transplant recipients should be monitored for immune responses, and novel individual vaccination strategies might be needed and evaluated in clinical trials in this vulnerable cohort. Nevertheless, studies with more participants and various vaccine candidates are needed to evaluate the different effects and further immune responses like B- and T-cell responses in patients after SOT.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, J.K., O.D., M.J., B.W., S.D. and A.K.; methodology, O.D., O.W. and B.S.-H.; validation, O.E.A., U.D., U.E., A.G. and B.W.; formal analysis, J.K., M.J., B.W., O.D. and A.K.; writing—original draft preparation, J.K., M.J., B.W., S.D. and A.K.; project administration, J.K.; All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the ethics committee of the Medical Faculty of the University Duisburg-Essen (20-9753-BO).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

**Acknowledgments:** The authors would like to thank Hannah Pfeng, Assia Omairatte, Emel Karaca Rebecca Blinzler and Christiane Kautsch for excellent assistance. Oliver Witzke is supported by an unrestricted grant of the Rudolf-Ackermann-Stiftung (Stiftung für Klinische Infektiologie). We acknowledge support by the Open Access Publication Fund of the University of Duisburg-Essen.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The other authors declared no conflict of interests.

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