

## EPIDEMIOLOGICAL SCIENCE

# Characteristics associated with poor COVID-19 outcomes in individuals with systemic lupus erythematosus: data from the COVID-19 Global Rheumatology Alliance

Manuel Francisco Ugarte-Gil <sup>1,2</sup>, Graciela S Alarcón <sup>3,4</sup>, Zara Izadi <sup>5,6</sup>, Ali Duarte-García <sup>7,8</sup>, Cristina Reátegui-Sokolova <sup>2,9</sup>, Ann Elaine Clarke,<sup>10</sup> Leanna Wise,<sup>11</sup> Guillermo J Pons-Estel <sup>12,13</sup>, Maria Jose Santos <sup>14,15</sup>, Sasha Bernatsky <sup>16</sup>, Sandra Lúcia Euzébio Ribeiro <sup>17</sup>, Samar Al Emadi <sup>18</sup>, Jeffrey A Sparks <sup>19</sup>, Tiffany Y -T Hsu <sup>19</sup>, Naomi J Patel,<sup>20</sup> Emily L Gilbert,<sup>21</sup> Maria O Valenzuela-Almada,<sup>7</sup> Andreas Jönsen,<sup>22</sup> Gianpiero Landolfi,<sup>23</sup> Micaela Fredi,<sup>24,25</sup> Tiphaine Goulenok,<sup>26,27</sup> Mathilde Devaux,<sup>28</sup> Xavier Mariette <sup>29</sup>, Viviane Queyrel,<sup>30</sup> Vasco C Romão <sup>31,32</sup>, Graca Sequeira,<sup>33</sup> Rebecca Hasseli,<sup>34</sup> Bimba Hoyer,<sup>35</sup> Reinhard E Voll,<sup>36</sup> Christof Specker <sup>37</sup>, Roberto Baez,<sup>38</sup> Vanessa Castro-Coello,<sup>39</sup> Hernan Maldonado Ficco,<sup>40</sup> Edgard Torres Reis Neto <sup>41</sup>, Gilda Aparecida Ferreira <sup>42,43</sup>, Odirlei Andre André Monticielo <sup>44,45</sup>, Emily Sirotych <sup>46,47</sup>, Jean Liew,<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Hausmann <sup>49,50</sup>, Paul Sufka,<sup>51</sup> Rebecca Grainger,<sup>52</sup> Suleman Bhana,<sup>53</sup> Wendy Costello,<sup>54</sup> Zachary S Wallace,<sup>20</sup> Lindsay Jacobsohn,<sup>6</sup> Tiffany Taylor,<sup>6</sup> Clairissa Ja,<sup>6</sup> Anja Strangfeld <sup>55</sup>, Elsa F Mateus <sup>56,57</sup>, Kimme L Hyrich <sup>58,59</sup>, Loreto Carmona <sup>60</sup>, Saskia Lawson-Tovey <sup>59,61</sup>, Lianne Kearsley-Fleet <sup>62</sup>, Martin Schäfer <sup>63</sup>, Pedro M Machado <sup>64,65,66,67</sup>, Philip C Robinson <sup>68,69</sup>, Milena Gianfrancesco,<sup>6</sup> Jinoos Yazdany<sup>6</sup>

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For numbered affiliations see end of article.

## Correspondence to

Manuel Francisco Ugarte-Gil, Universidad Científica del Sur, Miraflores, Peru; [mugarte@cientifica.edu.pe](mailto:mugarte@cientifica.edu.pe)

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim** To determine characteristics associated with more severe outcomes in a global registry of people with systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) and COVID-19.

**Methods** People with SLE and COVID-19 reported in the COVID-19 Global Rheumatology Alliance registry from March 2020 to June 2021 were included. The ordinal outcome was defined as: (1) not hospitalised, (2) hospitalised with no oxygenation, (3) hospitalised with any ventilation or oxygenation and (4) death.

A multivariable ordinal logistic regression model was constructed to assess the relationship between COVID-19 severity and demographic characteristics, comorbidities, medications and disease activity.

**Results** A total of 1606 people with SLE were included. In the multivariable model, older age (OR 1.03, 95% CI 1.02 to 1.04), male sex (1.50, 1.01 to 2.23), prednisone dose (1–5 mg/day 1.86, 1.20 to 2.66, 6–9 mg/day 2.47, 1.24 to 4.86 and ≥10 mg/day 1.95, 1.27 to 2.99), no current treatment (1.80, 1.17 to 2.75), comorbidities (eg, kidney disease 3.51, 2.42 to 5.09, cardiovascular disease/hypertension 1.69, 1.25 to 2.29) and moderate or high SLE disease activity (vs remission; 1.61, 1.02 to 2.54 and 3.94, 2.11 to 7.34, respectively) were associated with more severe outcomes. In age-adjusted and sex-adjusted models, mycophenolate, rituximab and cyclophosphamide were associated with worse outcomes

compared with hydroxychloroquine; outcomes were more favourable with methotrexate and belimumab.

**Conclusions** More severe COVID-19 outcomes in individuals with SLE are largely driven by demographic factors, comorbidities and untreated or active SLE.

Patients using glucocorticoids also experienced more severe outcomes.

## INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals with systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) have been of particular concern. SLE disproportionately impacts populations most severely affected by COVID-19, including those from non-white racial and ethnic groups, and those with low socioeconomic status.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, individuals with SLE are often heavily immunosuppressed and have a high comorbidity burden with multiple risk factors for more severe COVID-19. Although previous analyses have evaluated outcomes of infection with SARS-Cov-2 in rheumatic diseases as a group, data on individuals with SLE are limited, and it remains unclear which risk factors are associated with worse COVID-19 outcomes in this population.

## Key messages

**What is already known about this subject?**

- ▶ Demographic factors as well as comorbidities have been associated with poorer COVID-19 outcomes in the general population.
- ▶ The COVID-19 Global Rheumatology Alliance has reported glucocorticoid dose ( $\geq 10$  mg/day), some immunosuppressive drugs and disease activity as predictors of poorer COVID-19 outcomes in individuals with different rheumatic diseases.

**What does this study add?**

- ▶ More severe COVID-19 outcomes in individuals with systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) are mainly driven by demographic factors, comorbidities and untreated or active SLE.
- ▶ Individuals using glucocorticoids (even low dose) experienced more severe outcomes.

**How might this impact on clinical practice or future developments?**

- ▶ Individuals with lupus and these characteristics should be prioritised for close monitoring, counselled to receive vaccination, and receive preventive therapies if infected with SARS-CoV2.

Data from the COVID-19 Global Rheumatology Alliance (C19-GRA) registry, a large physician reported registry of individuals with rheumatic diseases and COVID-19, suggest that those with moderate or high disease activity, as well as those receiving specific medications, including moderate or high doses of prednisone, rituximab, immunosuppressive drugs (ie, mycophenolate mofetil/mycophenolic acid (MMF), tacrolimus, azathioprine and cyclophosphamide) compared with a reference group of individuals receiving methotrexate have poorer outcomes.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in an analysis of patients in the C19-GRA registry with rheumatoid arthritis (RA), treatment with rituximab or Janus Kinase (JAK) inhibitors was associated with poorer outcomes compared with treatment with tumour necrosis factor inhibitors.<sup>3</sup> However, medications associated with more severe COVID-19 outcomes in SLE have not been extensively examined.

OpenSAFELY, a large analysis of primary care records of >17 million adults linked to 10 926 COVID-19-related deaths reported that after adjustment for a wide variety of factors such as demographic characteristics and comorbidities, those with autoimmune disease (SLE, RA or psoriasis as a group) had a higher risk of mortality, but this study did not adjust for medication use, nor did it evaluate SLE as a discrete or separate disease.<sup>4</sup> Several case series or single-centre/country studies suggest that some individuals with SLE can have a severe disease course, but the small size of these studies has precluded a comprehensive analysis of risk factors for poor COVID-19 outcomes.<sup>5–10</sup>

We used the C19-GRA registry to identify sociodemographic and clinical factors associated with more severe COVID-19 outcomes in individuals with SLE.

**METHODS****Data source**

Subjects with rheumatic disease and COVID-19 from the C19-GRA registry and European Alliance of Associations for Rheumatology (EULAR) COVID-19 registry were included in the analyses, which covered the period from 12 March 2020 to 1

June 2021. Data entry portals include one limited to European countries (eular.org/eular\_covid19\_database.cfm; hosted by The University of Manchester, UK) and a second for all other countries (rheum-covid.org/provider-global/; hosted by the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), California, USA).<sup>11 12</sup> Cases are entered into these registries by their treating clinicians. This study includes all individuals from these registries with SLE diagnosed with COVID-19 by 1 June 2021. Prior studies using C19-GRA and EULAR databases have included some individuals also reported in this study,<sup>2 13 14</sup> but the number of individuals in this analysis is significantly higher than reported in previous publications.

Data quality was assessed by the data coordinating centres at UCSF and the University of Manchester and included procedures to identify and remove any duplicate cases.

**COVID-19 outcomes**

We used an ordinal severity outcome in the analyses, with mutually exclusive categories including: (1) not hospitalised, (2) hospitalised with no oxygenation, (3) hospitalised with any ventilation or oxygenation or (4) death. These outcomes were chosen so that the analyses could reflect the full spectrum of disease associated with COVID-19 and are analogous to outcome measures used in many trials evaluating COVID-19 therapeutics. Only the highest severity level of the outcome occurring during the patient's disease course was included, and all individuals were required to have a resolved clinical course.

**Covariates, including medication exposure**

Covariates included demographic characteristics, including age, sex and region (Europe, the USA and Canada, Latin America and other), as well as clinical characteristics, including number of comorbidities (including lung, liver or neurological diseases, cancer, diabetes, obesity, among others), specific comorbidities (chronic renal insufficiency or end-stage renal disease and hypertension or cardiovascular disease), disease activity (assessed by a physician global assessment categorised as remission, low, moderate or high), dose of glucocorticoids (GCs; entered as daily oral prednisone equivalents) and use of immunosuppressive or immunomodulating medications. Additionally, the date of the case report was analysed in three time periods: 24 March 2020 to 15 June 2020, 16 June 2020 to 30 September 2020 and 1 October 2020 to 1 June 2021. The first period ended at the release of the RECOVERY study, which changed COVID-19 treatment protocols to incorporate GCs.<sup>15</sup> The second cut-off was based on the beginning of the second wave in many countries around the world.

Medications taken by patients prior to COVID-19 were categorised as: conventional synthetic drugs (antimalarials (hydroxychloroquine, chloroquine), conventional disease-modifying monotherapies generally considered to represent less intensive immunosuppression (sulfasalazine, methotrexate and leflunomide), conventional disease-modifying monotherapies with more intense immunosuppressive drugs (MMF, tacrolimus, cyclophosphamide, ciclosporin, azathioprine)); biologics (abatacept, belimumab, rituximab, interleukin (IL)-6 inhibitors, IL-12/IL-23 inhibitors, IL-17 inhibitors, tumour necrosis factor inhibitors (anti-TNF)) and targeted synthetic drugs, specifically JAK inhibitors and GCs. In analyses, we divided medications into five groups: no SLE medications, antimalarial only, conventional disease-modifying monotherapies generally considered to represent less intensive immunosuppression (sulfasalazine, methotrexate and leflunomide), conventional disease-modifying

monotherapies with more intense immunosuppressive drugs (MMF, tacrolimus, cyclophosphamide, ciclosporin, azathioprine), biologic/targeted synthetic drug monotherapy and finally combination therapy with conventional and biologic disease-modifying immunosuppressive drugs. GCs were categorised into four groups by dose: prednisone dose=0 mg/day, between 1 and 5 mg/day, between 6 and 9 mg/day and  $\geq 10$  mg/day.

### Statistical analyses

We used proportional odds logistic regression with severity as dependent variable, and covariates as described in the next paragraphs. This is similar to using binary logistic regression for each of the three possible dichotomisations of the four-category dependent variable, with the assumption that the OR is the same for each cut-off. The parallel lines test for proportional odds ordinal logistic regression confirmed that this assumption was not violated.

Models included demographic variables and clinical characteristics as well as the time period in the pandemic during which the case was reported. Random effects were included for country and time. These variables were applied to capture the significant variability in regulations enforcing personal protective equipment, hospital resource allocation and quarantine procedures between countries and over the course of the pandemic.

We assumed that missing data were ‘missing at random’ and missing data were handled using multiple imputation, with 50 imputed data sets.

In all models, we included sex, age, region, GCs as a categorical variable (0, 1–5, 6–9,  $\geq 10$  mg/day), immunosuppressive medication category, time period and random effects of country and time. To assess the additional impact of comorbidities, we constructed an additional model that included the number of comorbidities and, separately, that included key comorbidities in SLE, including renal disease and hypertension/cardiovascular disease. Finally, we constructed a model that included the above variables but additionally included SLE disease activity.

We conducted several additional analyses to examine associations of six medications of interest in SLE with COVID-19 outcomes: methotrexate ( $n=173$ ), azathioprine ( $n=235$ ), MMF ( $n=332$ ), cyclophosphamide ( $n=29$ ), rituximab ( $n=68$ ) and belimumab ( $n=104$ ). In these analyses, the drug of interest was excluded from the medication category of monotherapies with immunosuppressive drugs or from the biologics/targeted synthetic only category, and their effects were estimated separately. Four models were constructed for each medication: (1) unadjusted, (2) age-adjusted and sex-adjusted, (3) adjusted for age, sex, renal disease, hypertension/cardiovascular disease, comorbidity count, disease activity, region, time period and (4) confirmed cases (diagnosis made by PCR, antibody or antigen) adjusted for age, sex, renal disease, hypertension/cardiovascular disease, comorbidity count, disease activity, region and time period. Additionally, to evaluate the interaction between GC therapy and disease activity, an additional analysis was done adding this multiplicative interaction term.

A sensitivity analysis combining mechanical ventilation or death in the highest category was also performed.

Results were considered statistically significant using a two-sided  $p < 0.05$ . Analyses were conducted in R V.4.0.2 (R Core Team, 2020).

## RESULTS

As of 1 June 2021, 1922 subjects with SLE and COVID-19 were reported in the C19-GRA and EULAR registries. Baseline

**Table 1** Characteristics of patients with SLE at the time of COVID-19 diagnosis ( $n=1922$ )

Characteristics	Mean (SD) or number (percentage)
Age, years, mean (SD)	44.4 (14.1)
Female, n (%)	1734 (90.4%)
Race/Ethnicity, n (%)	
White	639 (33.3%)
Non-white	1102 (57.3%)
Missing	181 (9.4%)
Region, n (%)	
Europe	543 (28.3%)
USA and Canada	555 (28.9%)
Latin America	643 (33.5%)
Other	181 (9.4%)
Time period, n (%)	
<15 June 2020	733 (38.1%)
16 June–30 September 2020	444 (23.1%)
1 October 2020–12 April 2021	745 (38.8%)
Comorbidities, n (%)	
0	1098 (57.1%)
1	511 (26.6%)
$\geq 2$	313 (16.3%)
Specific comorbidities, n (%)	
Chronic renal insufficiency or ESRD	223 (11.8%)
Hypertension or cardiovascular disease	597 (31.1%)
Disease activity, n (%)	
Remission	587 (30.5%)
Minimal or low	700 (36.4%)
Moderate	229 (11.9%)
Severe or high	77 (4.0%)
Missing	329 (17.1%)
Prednisone dose*, n (%)	
0 mg/day	846 (44.0%)
1–5 mg/day	467 (24.3%)
6–9 mg/day	78 (4.1%)
$\geq 10$ mg/day	280 (14.6%)
Missing	251 (13.1%)
Medication category, n (%)	
Antimalarials only	665 (34.6%)
No SLE therapy	230 (12.0%)
Oral synthetic drug monotherapy with methotrexate, leflunomide or sulfasalazine only†	175 (9.1%)
Oral synthetic drug monotherapy with (mycophenolate/ mycophenolic acid, tacrolimus, cyclophosphamide, ciclosporin or azathioprine)†	630 (32.8%)
Biologic/Targeted synthetic monotherapy	45 (2.3%)
Biologic/Targeted and immunosuppressive drug combination therapy†	177 (9.2%)

\*All glucocorticoids were converted to prednisone-equivalent doses.

†These patients could be also on antimalarials.

ESRD, end-stage renal disease; SLE, systemic lupus erythematosus.

demographic and clinical characteristics are shown in table 1. Individuals were predominantly female (90.4%) and the mean age was 44.4 years (SD=14.1). Of the 1922 cases, 555 (28.9%) were reported from the USA and Canada, 543 (28.3%) from Europe, 643 (33.5%) from Latin America and 181 (9.4%) from other regions. The majority were non-white (57.3%).

Antimalarials were used as monotherapy by 665 individuals (34.6%), more intense immunosuppressive monotherapies (MMF, tacrolimus, cyclophosphamide, ciclosporin, azathioprine, with or without antimalarials) were used by 630 individuals

**Table 2** Ordinal COVID-19 severity outcome as a function of medication class in individuals with SLE (n=1606)

	Total (n=1606)	Antimalarial only (n=532)	No DMARD (n=182)	Monotherapy with methotrexate, leflunomide or sulfasalazine only* (n=152)	Monotherapy with mycophenolate/ mycophenolic acid, tacrolimus, cyclophosphamide, ciclosporin or azathioprine* (n=539)	Biologic/Targeted monotherapy* (n=40)	Biologic/Targeted+ immunosuppressive drug combination therapy* (n=161)
Not hospitalised	1118 (69.6%)	401 (75.4%)	102 (56.0%)	117 (77.0%)	358 (66.4%)	27 (67.5%)	113 (70.2%)
Hospitalised with no oxygenation	169 (10.5%)	50 (9.4%)	26 (14.3%)	14 (9.2%)	62 (11.5%)	4 (10.0%)	13 (8.1%)
Hospitalised with any ventilation/oxygenation	214 (13.3%)	53 (10.0%)	34 (18.7%)	14 (9.2%)	84 (15.6%)	6 (15.0%)	23 (14.3%)
Death	105 (6.5%)	28 (5.3%)	20 (11.0%)	7 (4.6%)	35 (6.5%)	3 (7.5%)	12 (7.5%)

\*These patients could be also on antimalarials. DMARD, disease-modifying antirheumatic drug; SLE, systemic lupus erythematosus.

(32.8%) at the time of COVID-19 onset. Two hundred and thirty (12.0%) individuals did not take immunosuppressive drugs or antimalarials. Eight hundred and forty-six (44.0%) individuals did not take prednisone, 467 (24.3%) individuals took between 1 and 5 mg/day, 78 (4.1%) individuals took between 6 and 9 mg/day and 280 (14.6%) individuals took a dose ≥10 mg/day.

Clinical outcomes, as well as outcomes as a function of treatment, for 1606 individuals were captured and are shown in table 2. The majority of individuals (69.6%) were not hospitalised. In the model including demographics, clinical characteristics, medications and disease activity, there were significant associations between demographic factors (older age, male sex, geographic location (being from outside of Europe, USA and Canada and Latin America), time period of the pandemic) and the ordinal severity outcome. Among comorbidities, chronic renal insufficiency or end-stage renal disease, hypertension/ cardiovascular disease and the number of other comorbidities were associated with more severe outcomes. GC use was also associated with more severe outcomes compared with those without GCs. Those who were not being treated for their SLE, or had moderate or high SLE disease activity also experienced more severe outcomes compared with those on remission (table 3). These findings were consistent across various sensitivity analysis models (online supplemental table 1).

Finally, additional analyses were performed to assess the associations of methotrexate, azathioprine, MMF, cyclophosphamide, rituximab and belimumab separately with the ordinal severity outcome, demonstrating that there was no independent association of these drugs with the ordinal severity outcome in the fully adjusted model; however, rituximab was associated with poorer outcomes and belimumab with better outcomes in the unadjusted as well as the age-adjusted and sex-adjusted model, and MMF and cyclophosphamide were associated with poorer outcomes and methotrexate was associated with better outcomes only in the age-adjusted and sex-adjusted model (table 4). There was no statistically significant interaction between GC dose and disease activity or between DMARD use and disease activity (data not shown).

The results were nearly identical (online supplemental tables 2 and 3) in the alternative model in which mechanical ventilation and death were combined to constitute the highest category.

## DISCUSSION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, rheumatologists have been particularly concerned about individuals with SLE. These individuals are often significantly immunosuppressed, commonly use moderate or high doses of GCs and have a high comorbidity burden. Moreover, many types of immune dysregulation occur in SLE, including in the interferon pathway, which is critical to the innate immune response during SARS-CoV-2

infection.<sup>16</sup> However, SLE is a relatively uncommon disease and it has been difficult to accumulate a sufficient number of cases to examine risk factors for poor COVID-19 outcomes in this

**Table 3** Multivariable ordinal regression model examining characteristics associated with more severe COVID-19 outcomes in individuals with SLE

Covariate	OR (95% CI)	P value
Age (years)	1.03 (1.02 to 1.04)	<0.001**
Sex		
Male	1.50 (1.01 to 2.23)	0.042*
Region		
Europe	Reference	
USA and Canada	0.82 (0.22 to 3.02)	0.76
Latin America	1.97 (0.87 to 4.48)	0.11
Other	4.79 (2.21 to 10.37)	<0.001**
Time period		
≤15 June 2020	Reference	
16 June–30 September 2020	0.50 (0.35 to 0.72)	<0.001**
1 October 2020–12 April 2021	0.40 (0.29 to 0.57)	<0.001**
GC dose		
0 mg/day	Reference	
1–5 mg/day	1.86 (1.30 to 2.66)	<0.001**
6–9 mg/day	2.47 (1.25 to 4.86)	0.009**
≥10 mg/day	1.95 (1.27 to 2.99)	0.002**
Medication category		
Antimalarial only	Reference	
No SLE therapy	1.80 (1.17 to 2.75)	0.007**
Monotherapy with methotrexate, leflunomide or sulfasalazine only†	0.74 (0.44 to 1.24)	0.25
Monotherapy with mycophenolate/mycophenolic acid, tacrolimus, cyclophosphamide, ciclosporin or azathioprine†	1.01 (0.71 to 1.43)	0.95
Biologic/Targeted synthetic drug monotherapy	1.38 (0.58 to 3.26)	0.47
Biologic/Targeted synthetic drug and immunosuppressive drug combination therapy†	1.17 (0.72 to 1.91)	0.52
Number of comorbidities (excluding renal and cardiovascular disease/hypertension)	1.60 (1.24 to 2.07)	<0.001**
Chronic renal insufficiency or end-stage renal disease	3.51 (2.42 to 5.09)	<0.001**
Cardiovascular/Hypertension	1.69 (1.25 to 2.29)	<0.001**
Disease activity		
Remission	Reference	
Minimal or low	0.86 (0.61 to 1.21)	0.38
Moderate	1.61 (1.02 to 2.54)	0.041*
Severe or high	3.94 (2.11 to 7.34)	<0.001**

Each model adjusted for all variables listed, and random effects for country and time.

\*P<0.05; \*\*p<0.01.

†These patients could be also on antimalarials.

GC, glucocorticoids; SLE, systemic lupus erythematosus.

**Table 4** Ordinal regression models examining the association between individual medications and more severe COVID-19 outcomes in individuals with SLE

	Number of individuals taking medication prior to COVID-19 diagnosis with observed outcome	Unadjusted n=1606		Age-adjusted and sex-adjusted n=1606		Fully adjusted model† n=1606		Fully adjusted model +confirmed COVID-19‡ n=1283	
		OR (95% CI)	P value	OR (95% CI)	P value	OR (95% CI)	P value	OR (95% CI)	P value
Methotrexate	173	0.71 (0.50 to 1.01)	0.06	0.67 (0.47 to 0.97)	0.032*	0.71 (0.43 to 1.16)	0.17	0.71 (0.40 to 1.25)	0.23
Azathioprine	235	0.88 (0.66 to 1.19)	0.42	0.95 (0.70 to 1.29)	0.75	0.87 (0.57 to 1.34)	0.53	0.89 (0.54 to 1.47)	0.65
Mycophenolate/Mycophenolic acid	332	1.20 (0.93 to 1.55)	0.15	1.36 (1.05 to 1.76)	0.021*	1.08 (0.73 to 1.59)	0.72	1.27 (0.82 to 1.98)	0.29
Cyclophosphamide	29	1.92 (0.95 to 3.91)	0.07	2.55 (1.23 to 5.28)	0.012*	–	–	–	–
Rituximab	68	1.62 (1.00 to 2.63)	0.049*	1.69 (1.04 to 2.75)	0.036*	1.56 (0.84 to 2.90)	0.16	1.91 (0.97 to 3.79)	0.063
Belimumab	104	0.52 (0.32 to 0.86)	0.011*	0.51 (0.31 to 0.85)	<0.001**	0.66 (0.34 to 1.28)	0.22	0.65 (0.31 to 1.34)	0.24

\*P&lt;0.05; \*\*p&lt;0.01.

†Model adjusted for age, sex, renal disease, hypertension/cardiovascular disease, comorbidity count, disease activity, region, time period, glucocorticoid and other DMARD medication categories; random effects applied for country and time. Reference group=antimalarial only.

‡Confirmed cases were defined as having a diagnosis made by PCR, antibody or antigen test or a CT scan.

DMARD, disease-modifying antirheumatic drug; SLE, systemic lupus erythematosus.

vulnerable population. Here, we report the largest study of SLE and COVID-19 to date. In our analyses of over 1600 cases, we found that the use of GCs, having untreated or active SLE, or using rituximab was associated with more severe COVID-19 outcomes. In addition to these factors specific to SLE, our findings also highlight that many factors associated with more severe COVID-19 outcomes in the general population are important in SLE, including male gender,<sup>15 17 18</sup> age<sup>17–20</sup> and comorbidity burden.<sup>17–19</sup>

Prednisone use, even at relatively low doses of <5 mg/day, was associated with poorer outcomes in our analysis. In the C19-GRA registry, which included a wide array of rheumatic diseases, only prednisone at doses  $\geq 10$  mg/day was associated with hospitalisation or mortality.<sup>4 13</sup> Interestingly, in additional analyses of the registry we found that in the absence of disease activity, the relationship between GC and mortality diminished.<sup>21</sup> However, in SLE, even low doses of GCs were associated with more severe COVID-19 outcomes, including in those with low disease activity. Like our results, in a small study from Belgium, glucocorticoid dose was positively associated with a higher risk of hospitalisation in patients with SLE.<sup>22</sup> These findings suggest that GCs are of special concern during the pandemic for people with SLE.

Our analyses also demonstrated that individuals not receiving treatment for their SLE at the time of COVID-19 diagnosis had poorer outcomes. The poor outcomes seen in this group may be multifactorial, and it is plausible that social risk factors play a role, such as lack of access to SLE care or treatment, or poor adherence with medications. Consistent with these results, individuals outside Europe, the USA and Canada had a poorer outcome, possibly related to healthcare access, but it was not statistically significant for Latin American individuals. Poverty and inequality have been associated with a higher risk and severity of COVID-19 globally,<sup>14 23</sup> and it is likely that health disparities in SLE may be exacerbated by the pandemic.

Rituximab has been associated with poorer outcomes in patients with RA.<sup>2</sup> We also found this association in SLE in our analysis, but it was present only in the unadjusted and age-adjusted and sex-adjusted models; this may be due to the smaller number of individuals on rituximab in our study and resultant low power in statistical analyses (n=68). In fully adjusted models (including confirmed cases and those diagnosed based on symptoms and epidemiological criteria), there was a trend for an association between rituximab and poorer outcomes. It is important to point out that in the age-adjusted and sex-adjusted models MMF, cyclophosphamide was associated with poorer outcomes.

Cyclophosphamide was not evaluated in a fully adjusted model due to a small sample size. These findings are similar to what has been reported in other studies. For example, in a recent meta-regression including several rheumatic diseases, GC use and immunosuppressive drugs use in monotherapy or combination were associated with hospitalisation and death from COVID-19.<sup>24</sup> Patients using belimumab generally had more favourable outcomes in our study; it is unclear if this may partly reflect confounding by healthcare access or socioeconomic status, as this drug is more commonly used in high-income nations. The association between methotrexate and better outcomes in the age-adjusted and sex-adjusted model could be related to a better disease activity control, as it did not remain significantly associated in the fully adjusted model. Because there were multiple comparisons, significance should be interpreted with caution. Given that there were six statistical comparisons made, one approach is to adjust the p value to a 0.01 level of significance. Using this more conservative approach, belimumab still remains statistically associated with less severe COVID-19 outcomes in the age-adjusted and sex-adjusted model.

Previous investigators have found an association between SLE disease activity and serious infections.<sup>25</sup> It is likely that both underlying immune dysfunction and the use of immunosuppressive therapies increase the risk of infection in SLE, which would explain the association between SLE disease activity and the severity of SARS-CoV-2 infection reported here.

The prognosis of patients with COVID-19 has improved over the course of the pandemic, which may be the result of many factors, including more widespread testing (leading to diagnosis of milder cases), improved pharmacological therapy and a better understanding of the timing, method of ventilatory support in critically ill patients and vaccination status for the most recent cases. Our findings suggest that patients with SLE diagnosed in later periods of the pandemic had better outcomes relative to the first part of the pandemic, which is consistent with the overall trends in the general population.<sup>26</sup>

It is important to note that chronic kidney disease, a common and serious complication of SLE, has one of the strongest associations with poor COVID-19 outcomes. Chronic kidney disease is also an important risk factor for severe COVID-19 in the general population and may even pose a greater risk than the presence of diabetes.<sup>27</sup> In addition to renal disease, our findings indicate that other comorbidities also increase the risk of severe outcomes, which is consistent with numerous previous studies.<sup>4 19 21</sup> In SLE, medications, particularly GCs, can impact important comorbidities such as hypertension,

diabetes or obesity,<sup>28</sup> which likely increases vulnerability to severe COVID-19 outcomes.

Several limitations of this study should be noted. First, the C19-GRA is a registry that is predicated on physician reporting of COVID-19 in patients with rheumatic disease, and as such, may be skewed to include more severe COVID-19 cases. Patients with more severe COVID-19 are more likely to come to the attention of their rheumatology provider. Second, even though we were able to examine the relationship of several factors with more severe outcomes, we cannot exclude other confounders like access to healthcare or socioeconomic status. Third, although the physician global assessment is a valid, responsive and feasible instrument, given its less than optimal reliability it is not ideal to just assess it to the exclusion of the patient's assessment or other measures of disease activity; this is a limitation of our study. Finally, we were underpowered to look at some important treatments for SLE, such as cyclophosphamide, in our fully adjusted models; data on voclosporin and anifrolumab, two newly approved therapies for SLE, were not available in the registry at the time of our analyses.

In conclusion, we found that in addition to age, male sex and comorbidities, the use of GCs and having untreated or active disease were associated with more severe COVID-19 outcomes in individuals with SLE. Individuals with these characteristics should be prioritised for close monitoring, counselled to receive vaccination and receive preventive therapies such as monoclonal antibodies (when available) if exposed to SARS-CoV-2.

#### Author affiliations

<sup>1</sup>Grupo Peruano de Estudio de Enfermedades Autoinmunes Sistémicas, Universidad Científica del Sur, Lima, Peru

<sup>2</sup>Rheumatology Department, Hospital Nacional Guillermo Almenara Irigoyen, EsSalud, Lima, Peru

<sup>3</sup>Heersink School of Medicine, University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, Alabama, USA

<sup>4</sup>School of Medicine, Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia, Lima, Peru

<sup>5</sup>Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, University of California, San Francisco, San Francisco, California, USA

<sup>6</sup>Division of Rheumatology, Department of Medicine, University of California, San Francisco, San Francisco, California, USA

<sup>7</sup>Division of Rheumatology, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota, USA

<sup>8</sup>Robert D. and Patricia E. Kern Center for the Science of Health Care Delivery, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, MN, USA

<sup>9</sup>Unidad de Investigación Para La Generación y Síntesis de Evidencias en Salud, Universidad San Ignacio de Loyola, Lima, Peru

<sup>10</sup>Division of Rheumatology Department of Medicine. Cumming School of Medicine, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

<sup>11</sup>Department of Internal Medicine, Division of Rheumatology, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California, USA

<sup>12</sup>Centro Regional de Enfermedades Autoinmunes y Reumáticas (GO-CREAR), Rosario, Argentina

<sup>13</sup>Research Unit, Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Buenos Aires, Argentina

<sup>14</sup>Rheumatology, Hospital Garcia de Orta, Almada, Portugal

<sup>15</sup>Rheumatology Research Unit. Instituto de Medicina Molecular João Lobo Antunes, Faculdade de Medicina, Universidade de Lisboa, Lisboa, Portugal

<sup>16</sup>Divisions of Rheumatology and Clinical Epidemiology, McGill University Health Centre, Montreal, Québec, Canada

<sup>17</sup>Faculdade de Medicina, Universidade Federal do Amazonas, UFAM, Manaus, Amazonas, Brazil

<sup>18</sup>Rheumatology Department, Hamad Medical Corp, Doha, Qatar

<sup>19</sup>Division of Rheumatology, Immunology and Allergy, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

<sup>20</sup>Division of Rheumatology, Allergy, and Immunology, Massachusetts General Hospital. Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

<sup>21</sup>Division of Rheumatology, Mayo Clinic, Jacksonville, Florida, USA

<sup>22</sup>Lund University, Lund, Sweden

<sup>23</sup>Epidemiology Research Unit, Italian Society for Rheumatology, Milan, Italy

<sup>24</sup>Rheumatology and Clinical Immunology, ASST Spedali Civili, Brescia, Italy

<sup>25</sup>Department of Clinical and Experimental Sciences, University of Brescia, Brescia, Italy

<sup>26</sup>Internal Medicine Department, Bichat Claude Bernard Hospital, APHP, Paris, France

<sup>27</sup>Université de Paris, Paris, France

<sup>28</sup>Internal Medicine Department, Poissy Saint-Germain-en-Laye Hospital, Poissy, France

<sup>29</sup>Department of Rheumatology, Université Paris-Saclay, Assistance Publique - Hôpitaux de Paris, Le Kremlin Bicêtre, France

<sup>30</sup>Department of Rheumatology, Pasteur 2 Hospital, University of Nice -Sophia-Antipolis, Nice, France

<sup>31</sup>Rheumatology Research Unit, Instituto de Medicina Molecular João Lobo Antunes, Faculdade de Medicina, Universidade de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal

<sup>32</sup>Rheumatology Department, Hospital de Santa Maria, Centro Hospitalar Universitário Lisboa Norte, Lisbon, Portugal

<sup>33</sup>Centro Hospitalar Universitário do Algarve, Unidade de Faro, Faro, Portugal

<sup>34</sup>Department of Rheumatology and Clinical Immunology. Campus Kerckhoff, Justus Liebig University Giessen, Bad Nauheim, Germany

<sup>35</sup>Department of Rheumatology and Clinical Immunology, Clinic for Internal Medicine I, University Hospital Schleswig-Holstein, Kiel, Germany

<sup>36</sup>Department of Rheumatology and Clinical Immunology, University Medical Center Freiburg, Faculty of Medicine, Albert-Ludwigs-University of Freiburg, Freiburg, Germany

<sup>37</sup>Department of Rheumatology and Clinical Immunology, Kliniken Essen-Mitte, Essen, Germany

<sup>38</sup>Hospital Francisco Lopez Lima, General Roca, Argentina

<sup>39</sup>Sanatorio Güemes, Buenos Aires, Argentina

<sup>40</sup>Hospital San Antonio de Padua, Rio Cuarto, Argentina

<sup>41</sup>Hospital São Paulo, Universidade Federal de Sao Paulo, Sao Paulo, Brazil

<sup>42</sup>Hospital das Clínicas, Belo Horizonte, Brazil

<sup>43</sup>Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil

<sup>44</sup>Hospital de Clínicas de Porto Alegre, Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil

<sup>45</sup>Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, Brazil

<sup>46</sup>Department of Health Research Methods, Evidence, and Impact, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

<sup>47</sup>Canadian Arthritis Patient Alliance, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

<sup>48</sup>Section of Rheumatology, Department of Medicine, Boston University School of Medicine, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

<sup>49</sup>Rheumatology, Boston Children's Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

<sup>50</sup>Division of Rheumatology and Clinical Immunology, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center. Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

<sup>51</sup>Healthpartners, St Paul, Minnesota, USA

<sup>52</sup>Department of Medicine, University of Otago, Wellington, New Zealand

<sup>53</sup>Pfizer, Inc, New York, New York, USA

<sup>54</sup>Irish Children's Arthritis Network (iCAN), Tipperary, Ireland

<sup>55</sup>Epidemiology and Health Services, German Rheumatism Research Center (DRFZ Berlin), Berlin, Germany

<sup>56</sup>Portuguese League Against Rheumatic Diseases (LPCDR), Lisbon, Portugal

<sup>57</sup>European League Against Rheumatism (EULAR) Standing Committee of People with Arthritis/Rheumatism in Europe (PARE), Kilchberg, Switzerland

<sup>58</sup>Centre for Epidemiology Versus Arthritis, The University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

<sup>59</sup>National Institute of Health Research Manchester Biomedical Research Centre, Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust, Manchester Academic Health Science Centre, Manchester, UK

<sup>60</sup>Instituto de Salud Musculoesquelética, Madrid, Spain

<sup>61</sup>Centre for Genetics and Genomics Versus Arthritis, Centre for Musculoskeletal Research, The University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

<sup>62</sup>Centre for Epidemiology Versus Arthritis, Manchester Academic Health Science Centre, The University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

<sup>63</sup>Epidemiology and Health Care Research, German Rheumatism Research Center (DRFZ Berlin), Berlin, Germany

<sup>64</sup>Centre for Rheumatology & Department of Neuromuscular Diseases, University College London, London, UK

<sup>65</sup>National Institute for Health Research (NIHR), University College London Hospitals, London, UK

<sup>66</sup>Biomedical Research Centre, University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, London, UK

<sup>67</sup>Department of Rheumatology, Northwick Park Hospital, London North West University Healthcare NHS Trust, London, UK

<sup>68</sup>School of Clinical Medicine, The University of Queensland, Herston, Queensland, Australia

<sup>69</sup>Department of Rheumatology. Metro North Hospital & Health Service, Royal Brisbane and Woman's Hospital, Herston, Queensland, Australia

**Twitter** Manuel Francisco Ugarte-Gil @mugartegil, Zara Izadi @IzadiZara, Ali Duarte-García @AliDuarteMD, Leanna Wise @LeannaWiseMD, Guillermo J Pons-Estel @gponsestel, Samar Al Emadi @Dr\_samaralemadi, Jeffrey A Sparks @jeffsparks, Christof Specker @ChSpecker, Vanessa Castro-Coello @vane\_castro\_c, Emily Sirotych @emilysirotych, Jean Liew @rheum\_cat, Jonathan Hausmann @hausmannmd, Rebecca Grainger @drbeckyg, Zachary S Wallace @zach\_wallace\_md, Loreto Carmona @carmona\_loreto, Saskia Lawson-Tovey @saskiaamber, Pedro M Machado @pedrommcmachado and Philip C Robinson @philipcrobison

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**Collaborators** The COVID-19 Global Rheumatology Alliance (GRA): Brahim Dahou (Association Rhumatologues Algériens Privés (ARAP), Algeria); Rosana Quintana (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Gimena Gómez (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Karen Roberts (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Vanessa Castro Coello (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); María J. Haye Salinas (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Federico Nicolas Maldonado (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Alvaro Andres Reyes Torres (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Gelsomina Alle (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Romina Tanten (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Hernán Maldonado Ficco (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Romina Nieto (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Carla Gobbi (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Yohana Tissera (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Cecilia Pisoni (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Alba Paula (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Juan Alejandro Albiero (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); María Marcela Schmid (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Micaela Cosatti (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); María Julieta Gamba (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Carlevaris Leandro (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); María Alejandra Cusa (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Noelia German (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Veronica Bellomio (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Lorena Takashima (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Mariana Pera (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Karina Cogo (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); María Soledad Gálvez Elkin (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); María Alejandra Medina (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Veronica Savio (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Ivana Romina Rojas Tessel (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Rodolfo Perez Alamino (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Marina Laura Werne (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Sofía Ornella (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Luciana Casalla (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); María de la Vega (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); María Severina (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Mercedes García (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Luciana Gonzalez Lucero (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Cecilia Romeo (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Sebastián Moyano (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Tatiana Barbich (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Ana Bertoli (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Andrea Baños (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Sandra Petruzzelli (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Carla Matellan (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Silvana Conti (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Ma. Alicia Lazaro (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Gustavo Fabián Rodríguez Gil (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Fabian Risueño (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); María Isabel Quaglia (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Julia Scafati (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Natalia Lili Cuchiari (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Jonathan Eliseo Rebak (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Susana Isabel Pineda (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); María Elena Calvo (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Eugenia Picco (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Josefina Gallino Yanzi (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Pablo Maid (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Debora Guaglianone (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Julieta Silvana Morbiducci (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Sabrina Porta (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Natalia Herscovich (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); José Luis Velasco Zamora (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Boris Kisluk (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); María Sol Castañón Menescardi (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Rosana Gallo (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); María Victoria Martire (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Carla Maldini (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Cecilia Goizueta (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Sabrina Solange de la Vega Fernandez (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Carolina Aeschlimann (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Gisela Subils (Argentine Society of Rheumatology, Argentina); Eva Rath (Hanusch Krankenhaus, Vienna, Austria); Yves Piette (AZ Sint-Jan Brugge, Belgium); Mieke Devinck (AZ Sint-Lucas Brugge, Belgium); Bea Maeyaert (AZ Sint-Lucas Brugge, Belgium); Francine Machado Ribeiro (Hospital Universitario Pedro Ernesto Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil); Sandra Lucia Euzebio Ribeiro (Federal University of Amazonas, Brazil); Marcelo Pinheiro (Universidade Federal De São Paulo Escola Paulista de Medicina e Escola Paulista de Enfermagem, Brazil); Sebastián Ibáñez (Clínica Alemana de Santiago, Chile); Anne-Marie Chassin-Trubert (Complejo Hospitalario San José, Chile); Lingli Dong (Tongji Hospital, China); Lui Cajas (Clínica Universitaria Colombia—Centro Medico Providencia Sanitas, Colombia); Marko Barešić (University Hospital Center Zagreb, Croatia); Branimir Anić (Division of Clinical Immunology and Rheumatology; Department of Internal Medicine, School of Medicine Zagreb, University Hospital Center Zagreb, Croatia); Melanie-Ivana Čulo

(University Hospital Dubrava, Zagreb, Croatia); Tea Ahel Pavelić (Clinical Hospital Center Rijeka, Croatia); Kristina Kovačević Stranski (University Hospital Osijek, Croatia); Boris Karanovic (UHC Zagreb, Croatia); Jiri Vencovsky (Institute of Rheumatology, Prague, Czechia); Marta Pichová (Medipont plus s.r.o., České Budějovice, Czechia); Maria Filkova (Institute of Rheumatology, Prague, Czechia); Hesham Hamoud (Al Azhar University Hospitals, Egypt); Dimitrios Vassilopoulos (Hippokraton General Hospital, Athens, Greece); Gabriela Maria, Guzman Melgar (Hospital del Valle, Honduras, Honduras); Ho So (Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong); Márta Király, (Petz Aladár University Teaching Hospital, Győr, Hungary); Mahdi Vojdani (Iran Rheumatology Center, Iran); Alexandra Balbir-Gurman (Rambam Rheumatology Institute, Haifa, Israel); Fatemah Abutiban (Kuwait Rheumatology Association, Kuwait); Julija Zepa (Pauls Stradins Clinical University Hospital, Riga, Latvia); Inita Bulina (Pauls Stradins Clinical University hospital, Riga, Latvia); Loreta Bukauskiene (Klaipeda University Hospital, Lithuania); Beatriz Zaueta (Centro Medico del Angel, Mexico); Angel Alejandro Castillo Ortiz (Centro Medico Las Americas, Mexico); Erick Zamora Tehozol (Centro Medico Pensiones, Mexico); David Vega (Hospital General de Zona #17, Mexico); Diana Cervantes Rosete (Instituto Nacional de Ciencias Médicas y Nutrición Salvador Zubirán, Mexico); Eduardo Martín Nares (Instituto Nacional de Ciencias Médicas y Nutrición Salvador Zubirán, Mexico); Tatiana Sofia Rodriguez-Reyna (Instituto Nacional de Ciencias Médicas y Nutrición Salvador Zubirán, Mexico); Marina Rull Gabayet (Instituto Nacional de Ciencias Médicas y Nutrición Salvador Zubirán, Mexico); Deshiré Alpizar-Rodríguez (Mexican College of Rheumatology, Mexico); Fedra Irazoque (Private Practice, Mexico); Xochitl Jimenez (Centro Medico Naval, Mexico); Lenny Geurts-van Bon (Ziekenhuisgroep Twente, The Netherlands); Theo Zijlstra (Isala Hospital, Zwolle, The Netherlands); Monique Hoekstra (Isala Hospital, Zwolle, The Netherlands); Nasra Al-Adhoubi (Royal Hospital, Oman); Babur Salim (Fauji Foundation Hospital, Pakistan); Enrique Giraldo (Complejo Hospitalario, Panama); Ariel Salinas (Hospital Essalud Alberto Sabogal Sologuren, Peru); Manuel Ugarte-Gil (Universidad Científica del Sur-Hospital Guillermo Almenara Irigoyen, Peru); Jarosław Nowakowski (University Hospital, Krakow, Poland); Samar Al-Emadi (Hamad Medical Corporation, Qatar); Richard Conway (St James' Hospital, Dublin, Republic of Ireland); Rachael Flood (Tallaght University Hospital, Republic of Ireland); Geraldine McCarthy (Mater Misericordiae University Hospital, Republic of Ireland); Ioana Felea (County Emergency Hospital, Cluj Napoca, Romania); Ileana Filipescu (County Emergency Hospital, Cluj Napoca, Romania); Simona Rednic (County Emergency Hospital, Cluj Napoca, Romania); Laura Groseanu (Sf Maria Clinical Hospital, Bucharest, Romania); Maria Magdalena Tamas (County Emergency Hospital, Cluj Napoca, Romania); Vanda Mlynarikova (National Institute of Rheumatic Diseases, Piešťany, Slovak Republic); Martina Skamlova (FNŠPDR, Banská Bystrica, Slovak Republic); Martin Zlnay (National Institute of Rheumatic Diseases, Piešťany, Slovak Republic); Dagmar Mičková (National Institute of Rheumatic Diseases, Piešťany, Slovak Republic); Lubica Capova (University Hospital, Bratislava, Slovak Republic); Zelmira Macejova (University Hospital, Košice, Slovak Republic); Emőke Šteňová (University Hospital Bratislava, Slovak Republic); Helena Raffayova (National Institute of Rheumatic Diseases, Piešťany, Slovak Republic); Gabriela Belakova (Medman s.r.o., Martin, Slovak Republic); Eva Strakova (Faculty Hospital Prešov, Slovak Republic); Marieta Senčarová (Louis Pasteur University Hospital, Košice, Slovak Republic); Soňa Žlnayová (Poliklinika MarMedco, s.r.o., Nové Mesto nad Váhom, Slovak Republic); Anna Sabová (súkromná reumatologická ambulancia, Vranov nad Topľou, Slovak Republic); Daniela Spisakova (University Hospital od L. Pasteur Kosice, Slovak Republic); Mária Oetterová (Safarik University Hospital, Kosice, Slovak Republic); Olga Lukacova (National Institute of Rheumatic Diseases, Piešťany, Slovak Republic); Martina Bakosova (UNB Nemocnica Stare Mesto, Bratislava, Slovak Republic); Alojzija Hocevar (UMC Ljubljana, Slovenia); Natalia de la Torre-Rubio (Hospital Universitario Puerta de Hierro Majadahonda, Spain); Juan José Alegre Sancho (Hospital Asistencial Dr Peset, Valencia, Spain); Montserrat Corteguera Coro (Complejo Asistencial Avila, Spain); Juan Carlos Cobeta Garcia (Hospital Ernest Lluch, Calatayud, Spain); María Carmen Torres Martín (Hospital Nuestra Señora Sonsoles, Avila, Spain); Jose Campos (Hospital Universitario Puerta de Hierro, Spain); Jose A Gomez Puerta (Hospital Clinic Barcelona, Spain); Gozd Kubra Yardimci (Hacettepe University Faculty of Medicine, Ankara, Turkey); Servet Akar (Izmir Katip Celebi University Atatürk Training and Research Hospital, Izmir, Turkey); Ozan Cemal Icacan (Bakirköy Dr Sadi Konuk Research and Training Hospital, Istanbul, Turkey); Selda çelik (Bakirköy Dr Sadi Konuk Educational and Research Hospital, Rheumatology Department, Istanbul, Turkey); Viktoriia Vasylets (Multifield Medical Centre, Odessa, Ukraine); Su-Ann Yeoh (University College London Hospital, London, UK); Claire Vandeveld (Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, UK); Sasha Dunt (Countess of Chester NHS Foundation Trust, UK); Jane Leeder (Norfolk & Norwich University Hospital, UK); Elizabeth Macphie (Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust, UK); Rosaria Salerno (King's College Hospital, UK); Christine Graver (Hampshire Hospitals NHS Trust, UK); Katie Williams (York District Hospital, UK); Sheila O'Reilly (Royal Derby Hospital, UK); Kirsty Devine (York/Scarborough Hospitals, UK); Jennifer Tyler (Royal United Hospital, Bath, UK); Elizabeth Warner (Lister Hospital, UK); James Pilcher (University Hospital Lewisham, UK); Samir Patel (Queen Elizabeth Hospital Woolwich, UK); Elena Nikiphorou (King's College Hospital, UK); Laura Chadwick (St Helens & Knowsley NHS Foundation Trust, UK); Caroline Mulvaney Jones (Llandudno Hospital, UK); Beverley Harrison (Salford Royal NHS FT, UK); Lucy Thornton (Bradford

Royal Infirmary, UK); Diana O’Kane (RNHRD at Royal United Hospital Bath, UK); Lucia Fusi (King’s College Hospital, UK); Audrey Low (Salford Royal NHS FT, UK); Sarah Horton (Minerva Health Centre, UK); Shradha Jatwani (Albert Einstein Medical Center, Pennsylvania, USA); Sara Baig (Arthritis and Rheumatology Consultants, Pennsylvania, USA); Hammad Bajwa (Arthritis and Rheumatology Consultants, Pennsylvania, USA); Vernon Berglund (Arthritis and Rheumatology Consultants, Pennsylvania, USA); Angela Dahle (Arthritis and Rheumatology Consultants, Pennsylvania, USA); Walter Dorman (Arthritis and Rheumatology Consultants, Pennsylvania, USA); Jody Hargrove (Arthritis and Rheumatology Consultants, Pennsylvania, USA); Maren Hilton (Arthritis and Rheumatology Consultants, Pennsylvania, USA); Nicholas Lebedoff (Arthritis and Rheumatology Consultants, Pennsylvania, USA); Susan Leonard (Arthritis and Rheumatology Consultants, Pennsylvania, USA); Jennifer Morgan (Arthritis and Rheumatology Consultants, Pennsylvania, USA); Emily Pfeifer (Arthritis and Rheumatology Consultants, Pennsylvania, USA); Archibald Skemp (Arthritis and Rheumatology Consultants, Pennsylvania, USA); Jeffrey Wilson (Arthritis and Rheumatology Consultants, Pennsylvania, USA); Anne Wolff (Arthritis and Rheumatology Consultants, Pennsylvania, USA); Eduardo Cepeda (Austin Diagnostic Clinic, USA); Kristin D’Silva (Brigham and Women’s Hospital, USA); Tiffany Hsu (Brigham and Women’s Hospital, USA); Naomi Serling-Boyd (Brigham and Women’s Hospital, USA); Jeffrey Sparks (Brigham and Women’s Hospital, USA); Derrick Todd (Brigham and Women’s Hospital, USA); Zachary Wallace (Brigham and Women’s Hospital, USA); Denise Hare (Capital Health Rheumatology, USA); Cassandra Calabrese (Cleveland Clinic, USA); Christopher Adams (East Alabama Medical Center, USA); Arezou Khosroshahi (Emory University, USA); Adam Kilian (George Washington University, USA); Douglas White (Gundersen Health System, USA); Melanie Winter (Gundersen Health System, USA); Theodore Fields (Hospital for Special Surgery, USA); Caroline Siegel (Hospital for Special Surgery, USA); Nicole Daver (Institute of Rheumatic and Autoimmune Diseases, USA); Melissa Harvey (Institute of Rheumatic and Autoimmune Diseases, USA); Neil Kramer (Institute of Rheumatic and Autoimmune Diseases, USA); Concetta Lamore (Institute of Rheumatic and Autoimmune Diseases, USA); Suneya Hogarty (Integrative Arthritis and Pain Consultants, USA); Karen Yeter (Kaiser Permanente, USA); Leanna Wise (Los Angeles County+USC Medical Center, USA); Faizah Siddique (Loyola University Medical Center, USA); Byung Ban (Medstar Georgetown University Hospital, USA); Tamar Tanner (Montefiore Medical Center, USA); Eric Ruderman (Northwestern Memorial, USA); William Davis (Ochsner Medical Center Rheumatology Department, USA); Robert Quinet (Ochsner Medical Center Rheumatology Department, USA); Evangeline Scopelitis (Ochsner Medical Center Rheumatology Department, USA); Karen Toribio Toribio (Ochsner Medical Center Rheumatology Department, USA); Tameka Webb-Deitege (Ochsner Medical Center Rheumatology Department, USA); Jerald Zakem (Ochsner Medical Center Rheumatology Department, USA); Khurram Abbass (Private Practice, USA); Gilbert Kepecs (Private Practice, USA); Lilliam Miranda (Rheumatology Center INC, USA); Michael Guma (Riverside Medical Group, USA); Ammar Haikal (Riverside Medical Group, USA); Sushama Mody (Riverside Medical Group, USA); Daric Mueller (Shores Rheumatology PC, USA); Arundathi Jayatilke (Temple University Hospital, USA); JoAnn Zell (University of Colorado, USA); Alison Bays (University of Washington, Seattle, USA); Kathryn Dao (UT Southwestern Medical Center, USA); Ezzati Fatemeh (UT Southwestern Medical Center, USA); Deborah Parks (Washington University Division of Rheumatology, USA); David Karp (UT Southwestern Medical Center, USA); Guillermo Quiceno (UT Southwestern Medical Center, USA).

**Contributors** MFU-G, GSA, MG and JY had access to the study data, developed the figures and tables and vouch for the data and analyses. AMG performed the statistical analyses and contributed to data quality control, data analysis and interpretation of data. All authors contributed to data collection, data analysis and interpretation of data. MFU-G, GSA, MG and JY directed the work, designed the data collection methods, contributed to data collection, data analysis and interpretation of data and had final responsibility for the decision to submit for publication. All authors contributed intellectual content during the drafting and revision of the work and approved the final version to be published. JY is the guarantor.

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**Ethics approval** This study involves human participants but the UK Health Research Authority and the University of Manchester, as well as the University of California, San Francisco Institutional Review Board exempted this study. The C19-GRA physician-reported registry was defined as ‘not human subjects research’ by the UK Health Research Authority and the University of Manchester, as well as under US Federal Guidelines assessed by the University of California, San Francisco Institutional Review Board. Due to the de-identified and non-interventional nature of the study, it was determined to be exempt by each institutional review board.

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**Data availability statement** Data are available on reasonable request. Data are available on reasonable request. Applications to access the data should be made to the C19-GRA Steering Committee.

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#### ORCID iDs

Manuel Francisco Ugarte-Gil <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1728-1999>  
 Graciela S Alarcón <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5190-9175>  
 Zara Izadi <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1867-0905>  
 Ali Duarte-García <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1749-5719>  
 Cristina Reátegui-Sokolova <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3421-2717>  
 Guillermo J Pons-Estel <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0647-929X>  
 Maria Jose Santos <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7946-1365>  
 Sasha Bernatsky <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9515-2802>  
 Sandra Lúcia Euzébio Ribeiro <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4777-8659>  
 Samar Al Emadi <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7942-4831>  
 Jeffrey A Sparks <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5556-4618>  
 Tiffany Y -T Hsu <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1041-8040>  
 Xavier Mariette <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4244-5417>  
 Vasco C Romão <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5603-9436>  
 Christof Specker <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2504-3229>  
 Edgard Torres Reis Neto <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0657-4825>  
 Gilda Aparecida Aparecida Ferreira <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1352-7261>  
 Odirlei Andre André Monticelo <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0720-2097>  
 Emily Sirotych <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7087-8543>  
 Jonathan Hausmann <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0786-8788>  
 Anja Strangfeld <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6233-022X>  
 Elsa F Mateus <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0059-2141>  
 Kimme L Hyrich <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8242-9262>  
 Loreto Carmona <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4401-2551>  
 Saskia Lawson-Tovey <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8611-162X>  
 Lianne Kearsley-Fleet <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0377-1575>  
 Martin Schäfer <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6487-3634>  
 Pedro M Machado <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8411-7972>  
 Philip C Robinson <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3156-3418>

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