



Clusters of inflammation in COVID-19: descriptive analysis and prognosis on more than 15,000 patients from the Spanish SEMI-COVID-19 Registry

Manuel Rubio-Rivas¹ · José María Mora-Luján¹ · Francesc Formiga¹ · Miguel Ángel Corrales González² · María del Mar García Andreu³ · Víctor Moreno-Torres⁴ · Gema María García García⁵ · José N Alcalá Pedrajas⁶ · Ramon Boixeda⁷ · Leticia Pérez-Lluna⁸ · Begoña Cortés-Rodríguez⁹ · Carmen Mella-Pérez¹⁰ · María de la Sierra Navas Alcántara¹¹ · Manuel Lorenzo López Reboiro¹² · Verónica Alfaro-Lara¹³ · Santiago Pérez-Martín¹⁴ · José Ángel Martín-Oterino¹⁵ · Anyuli Gracia Gutiérrez¹⁶ · Anabel Martín-Urda Díez-Canseco¹⁷ · Pere Comas Casanova¹⁸ · Cristina Pérez García¹⁹ · José F Varona^{20,21} · Ricardo Gómez-Huelgas^{22,23} · Juan-Miguel Antón-Santos²⁴ · Carlos Lumbreras-Bermejo²⁵ on behalf of the SEMI-COVID-19 Network

Received: 12 August 2021 / Accepted: 30 December 2021 / Published online: 2 March 2022
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Abstract

Uncontrolled inflammation following COVID-19 infection is an important characteristic of the most seriously ill patients. The present study aims to describe the clusters of inflammation in COVID-19 and to analyze their prognostic role. This is a retrospective observational study including 15,691 patients with a high degree of inflammation. They were included in the Spanish SEMI-COVID-19 registry from March 1, 2020 to May 1, 2021. The primary outcome was in-hospital mortality. Hierarchical cluster analysis identified 7 clusters. C1 is characterized by lymphopenia, C2 by elevated ferritin, and C3 by elevated LDH. C4 is characterized by lymphopenia plus elevated CRP and LDH and frequently also ferritin. C5 is defined by elevated CRP, and C6 by elevated ferritin and D-dimer, and frequently also elevated CRP and LDH. Finally, C7 is characterized by an elevated D-dimer. The clusters with the highest in-hospital mortality were C4, C6, and C7 (17.4% vs. 18% vs. 15.6% vs. 36.8% vs. 17.5% vs. 39.3% vs. 26.4%). Inflammation clusters were found as independent factors for in-hospital mortality. In detail and, having cluster C1 as reference, the model revealed a worse prognosis for all other clusters: C2 (OR = 1.30, $p = 0.001$), C3 (OR = 1.14, $p = 0.178$), C4 (OR = 2.28, $p < 0.001$), C5 (OR = 1.07, $p = 0.479$), C6 (OR = 2.29, $p < 0.001$), and C7 (OR = 1.28, $p = 0.001$). We identified 7 groups based on the presence of lymphopenia, elevated CRP, LDH, ferritin, and D-dimer at the time of hospital admission for COVID-19. Clusters C4 (lymphopenia + LDH + CRP), C6 (ferritin + D-dimer), and C7 (D-dimer) had the worst prognosis in terms of in-hospital mortality.

Keywords Coronavirus · COVID-19 · Cluster analysis · Inflammation · Prognosis · Mortality

Introduction

As of May 2021, COVID-19 has infected more than 170 million people worldwide and caused the death of more than 3.5 million people [1]. Death is largely due to the inflammatory escalation or host cytokine storm secondary to SARS-CoV-2

infection [2]. This inflammatory response has clearly analytically identifiable components [3]. Clinically, most individual patients showed the changes of lymphocyte counts, D-dimer, interleukin-6 (IL-6), C-reactive protein (CRP), ferritin, LDH, etc. Why some patients become more inflamed than others is not known for certain but it is possible that there is a genetic background that facilitates this. Among those patients who present with this exaggerated inflammatory response, different degrees of inflammation have been described that predict the short-term future of these patients [4]. However, this inflammation is far from being homogeneous in all patients. From these studies, we know that the more parameters of analytical inflammation the worse the

A complete list of the SEMI-COVID-19 Network members is provided in the Appendix.

✉ Manuel Rubio-Rivas
mrubio@bellvitgehospital.cat

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

prognosis. The next step is to find out if some parameters have more prognostic value than others. In fact, in clinical practice, we see how some patients start their analytical inflammation in one way and others in another. This suggests different pathways and perhaps also different prognoses.

The present study aims to describe the different clusters or differentiated groups of inflammation in COVID-19 and to analyze their prognostic role.

Materials and methods

Study design, patient selection, and data collection

The present study is a retrospective observational study of consecutive patients included in the Spanish SEMI-COVID-19 Registry, created by the Spanish Society of Internal Medicine (SEMI). This is a multicenter, nationwide registry with over 150 hospitals registered so far. From March 1, 2020 to May 1, 2021, 21,962 hospitalized patients were included in the Registry. The characteristics of this registry have been detailed in previous reports [5]. In brief, all included patients were diagnosed by polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test or rapid antigenic test for SARS-CoV-2 taken from a nasopharyngeal sample, sputum, or bronchoalveolar lavage. The collection of data from each patient in terms of sociodemographic data, comorbidities, laboratory data, treatments, and outcomes was verified by the principal investigator of each center through the review of clinical records. All participating centers in the register received confirmation from the relevant Ethics Committees, including Bellvitge University Hospital (PR 128/20). Informed consent was obtained from the subjects.

The inclusion criteria were all patients in the registry with a community (non-nosocomial) SARS-CoV-2 infection and belonging to the high-risk category of inflammation according to our previous report and based on the lab test on admission [4]. This category of high risk is based on the decrease in the lymphocyte count 101.5 mg/L , lactate dehydrogenase (LDH) $> 394 \text{ U/L}$, ferritin $> 1359.9 \text{ mcg/L}$, and D-dimer $> 1580 \text{ ng/mL}$.

The treatments received were in accordance with the medical guidelines available at the time of the pandemic [6–11]. In the absence of clinical evidence of any of the treatments at the initial time of the pandemic, their use was allowed off-label.

Outcomes definition

The primary outcome of the study was in-hospital mortality. Secondary outcomes were the requirement of high-flow nasal cannula (HFNC), non-invasive mechanical ventilation

(NIMV), invasive mechanical ventilation (IMV), or ICU admission.

Statistical analysis

Multiple imputations of missing data were performed. Categorical variables were expressed as absolute numbers and percentages. Continuous variables are expressed as mean plus standard deviation (SD) in the case of parametric distribution or median [IQR] in the case of non-parametric distribution. Differences between groups were assessed using the Chi-square test for categorical variables and ANOVA or Kruskal–Wallis test as appropriate for continuous variables. *p* values < 0.05 indicated statistical significance.

The cluster analysis was performed by ascendant hierarchical clustering on the 5 laboratory variables previously selected using Ward's minimum variance method with Euclidean squared distance [12]. Results are graphically depicted by a dendrogram. The number of clusters was estimated by the kmeans method. The cluster analysis model was included in a binary logistic regression, taking in-hospital mortality as the dependent variable. We introduced in the multivariate model those variables with a *p* value < 0.10 in the univariate model. In-hospital mortality between clusters was depicted by the Kaplan–Meier curves with their logarithmic range test (event: death; censored data: hospital discharge).

Statistical analysis was performed by IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 26.0. Armonk, NY, USA: IBM Corp.

Results

General baseline data between groups

From March 1, 2020 to May 1, 2021, 20,641 patients admitted for non-nosocomial COVID-19 were included in the SEMI-COVID-19 registry. Of these, 15,691 fell into the high-risk category for inflammation according to the laboratory tests at admission and were therefore included in the present study (Figure S1).

Hierarchical cluster analysis identified 7 clearly differentiated clusters (C1–C7) (Fig. 1). The baseline characteristics of the 7 clusters are shown in Table 1. It is noteworthy that C1 patients attend the hospital earlier from the onset. C2 and C3 patients have a lower Charlson index. C4 patients are older and predominantly male and have more comorbidity (mainly hypertension and dyslipidemia). C5 patients have more comorbidity (mainly hypertension, dyslipidemia and diabetes mellitus). Patients in groups C6 and

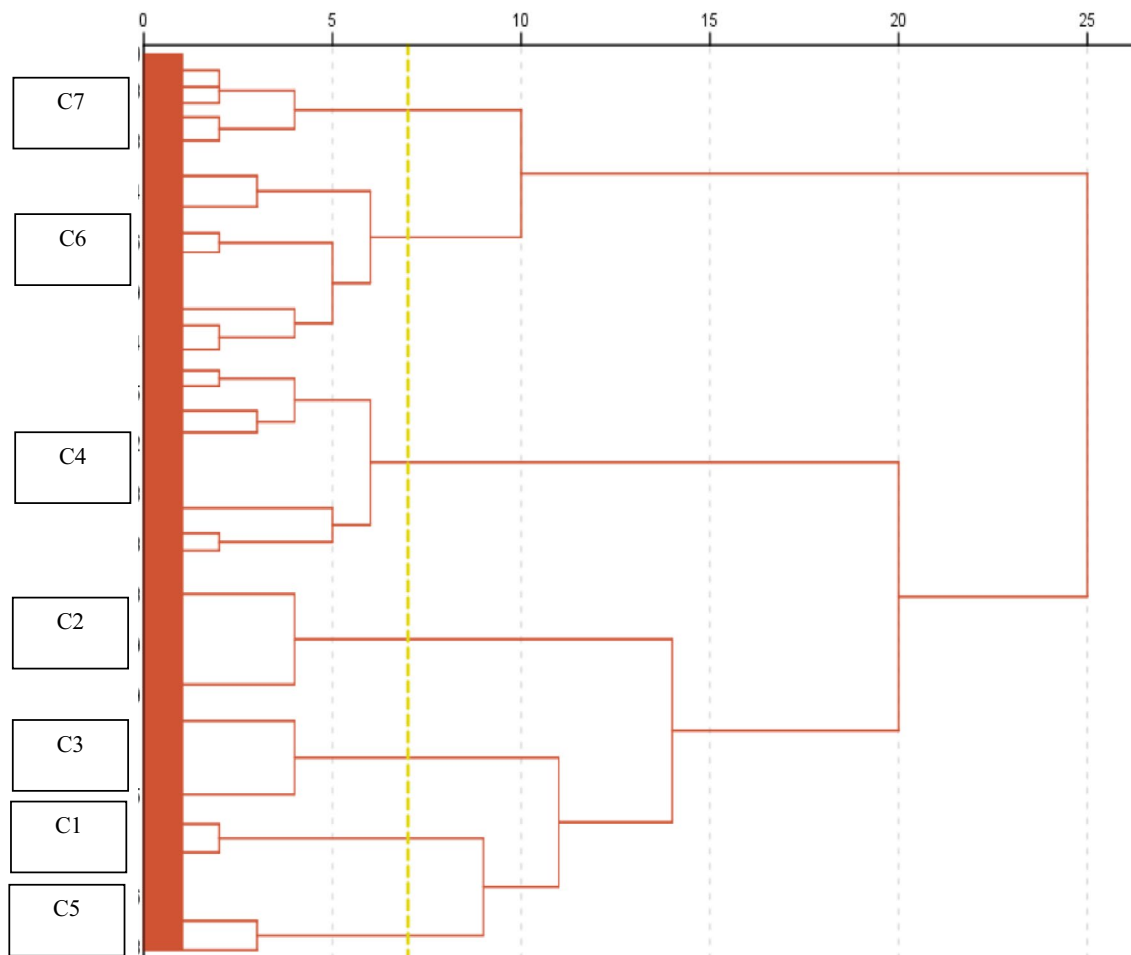


Fig. 1 Dendrogram. Clusters based on analytical inflammatory parameters upon admission. Cluster C1 is characterized by the presence of lymphopenia, cluster C2 by elevated ferritin, and C3 by elevated LDH. Cluster C4 is characterized by lymphopenia plus ele-

vated CRP and LDH and frequently also elevated ferritin. Cluster C5 is defined by elevated CRP, and cluster C6 by elevated ferritin and D-dimer and frequently also elevated CRP and LDH. Finally, cluster C7 is characterized by elevated D-dimer

C7 are older and have more dependency and comorbidity (mainly hypertension, dyslipidemia and diabetes mellitus).

Symptoms at the time of hospital admission are listed in Table S1. In particular, group C1 presents more frequently with a headache. C2 and C3 present more frequently with headaches, arthromyalgia, sore throat, cough, diarrhea, anosmia, and ageusia. C4 patients present more frequently with cough, tachypnea, and less diarrhea. Cluster C5 most frequently presents with headache, arthromyalgia, cough, anosmia, and ageusia. Clusters C6 and C7 present less frequently with fever and cough.

Laboratory tests between groups

Table S2 shows the inflammatory analytical parameters presented by each of the clusters. According to the most relevant analytical feature in each group, we can define cluster C1 by the presence of lymphopenia, cluster C2 by elevated

ferritin, and C3 by elevated LDH. Cluster C4 is characterized by lymphopenia plus elevated CRP and LDH and often also elevated ferritin. Cluster C5 is defined by elevated CRP, and cluster C6 by elevated ferritin and D-dimer and often also elevated CRP and LDH. Finally, group C7 is characterized by elevated D-dimer. Figure 2 shows the distribution of each of the inflammatory parameters in each cluster.

It should be noted that cluster C4 is the cluster with the lowest PaO₂/FiO₂ on admission. This fact possibly shows a greater inflammatory component and greater evolution to ARDS.

Treatments during admission

Table S3 shows the treatments received during admission. Logically, the clusters with a greater analytical inflammatory component (C4) received corticosteroids and tocilizumab more frequently. On the other hand, clusters with higher

Table 1 Patient characteristics between clusters of inflammation

	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	<i>p</i> value
<i>N</i>	2348	3574	1712	1014	1920	1598	3525	
Age, median [IQR]	71.1 [59.2–80.6]	66 [54.6–76.5]	67.3 [54.7–77.7]	71.6 [60.5–80.3]	68.4 [56.6–78.2]	74.6 [62–83.5]	76.1 [63.4–85.1]	< 0.001
Gender (males), <i>i</i> (%)	1412 (60.1)	2469 (69.1)	896 (52.3)	734 (72.4)	1099 (57.2)	1039 (65)	1830 (51.9)	< 0.001
Race, <i>n</i> (%)	2171 (92.5)	3171 (88.7)	1537 (89.7)	932 (91.9)	1648 (85.8)	1458 (91.2)	3242 (92)	< 0.001
Caucasian	9 (0.4)	24 (0.7)	7 (0.4)	3 (0.3)	9 (0.5)	8 (0.5)	17 (0.5)	
Black	140 (6)	318 (8.9)	138 (8.1)	66 (6.5)	223 (11.6)	105 (6.6)	217 (6.2)	
Hispanic	6 (0.3)	20 (0.6)	14 (0.8)	5 (0.5)	13 (0.7)	5 (0.3)	9 (0.3)	
Asian	22 (0.9)	41 (1.1)	16 (0.9)	8 (0.8)	27 (1.4)	22 (1.4)	40 (1.1)	
Others								
Days from onset to admission, median [IQR]	6 [3–9]	7 [4–10]	7 [4–9]	7 [4–9]	7 [4–10]	6 [3–9]	6 [3–9]	< 0.001
BMI, median [IQR]	28 [25–32]	29 [25–32]	28 [26–32]	29 [26–33]	29 [26–33]	29 [25–84]	28 [25–32]	< 0.001
Smoking behavior, <i>n</i> (%)	1604 (68.3)	2412 (67.5)	1190 (69.5)	663 (65.4)	1347 (70.2)	1046 (65.5)	2466 (70)	< 0.001
Never smoker	658 (28)	970 (27.1)	442 (25.8)	302 (29.8)	492 (25.6)	452 (28.3)	878 (24.9)	
Former smoker	86 (3.7)	192 (5.4)	80 (4.7)	49 (4.8)	81 (4.2)	100 (6.3)	181 (5.1)	
Current smoker								
Degree of dependency, <i>n</i> (%)	1958 (83.4)	3,156 (88.3)	1503 (87.8)	873 (86.1)	1648 (85.8)	1211 (75.8)	2558 (72.6)	< 0.001
None or mild	224 (9.5)	243 (6.8)	130 (7.6)	90 (8.9)	142 (7.4)	206 (12.9)	535 (15.2)	
Moderate	166 (7.1)	175 (4.9)	79 (4.6)	51 (5)	130 (6.8)	181 (11.3)	432 (12.3)	
Severe								
Arterial hypertension, <i>n</i> (%)	1244 (53)	1732 (48.5)	831 (48.5)	597 (58.9)	1038 (54.1)	902 (56.4)	2086 (59.2)	< 0.001
Dyslipidemia, <i>n</i> (%)	932 (39.7)	1332 (37.3)	662 (38.7)	447 (44.1)	813 (42.3)	672 (42.1)	1500 (42.6)	< 0.001
Diabetes mellitus, <i>n</i> (%)	50 (22.1)	609 (17)	287 (16.8)	209 (20.6)	480 (25)	403 (25.2)	852 (24.2)	< 0.001
Atrial fibrillation, <i>n</i> (%)	349 (14.9)	319 (8.9)	182 (10.6)	147 (14.5)	174 (9.1)	180 (11.3)	407 (11.5)	< 0.001
Ischemic cardiopathy, <i>n</i> (%)	227 (9.7)	224 (6.3)	123 (7.2)	80 (7.9)	148 (7.7)	153 (9.6)	332 (9.4)	< 0.001
Cerebrovascular disease, <i>n</i> (%)	182 (7.8)	216 (6)	113 (6.6)	90 (8.9)	124 (6.5)	134 (8.4)	326 (9.2)	< 0.001
Peripheral arterial disease, <i>n</i> (%)	95 (4)	116 (3.2)	50 (2.9)	49 (4.8)	75 (3.9)	113 (7.1)	212 (6)	< 0.001
Dementia, <i>n</i> (%)	221 (9.4)	234 (6.5)	126 (7.4)	68 (6.7)	150 (7.8)	236 (14.8)	596 (16.9)	< 0.001
Chronic heart failure, <i>n</i> (%)	199 (8.5)	159 (4.4)	110 (6.4)	77 (7.6)	97 (5.1)	138 (8.6)	351 (10)	< 0.001
Chronic liver disease, <i>n</i> (%)	88 (3.7)	115 (3.2)	60 (3.5)	39 (3.8)	50 (2.6)	81 (5.1)	132 (3.7)	0.008
Severe chronic renal failure, <i>n</i> (%)	163 (6.9)	179 (5)	82 (4.8)	60 (5.9)	84 (4.4)	153 (9.6)	320 (9.1)	< 0.001
Cancer, <i>n</i> (%)	280 (11.9)	296 (8.3)	150 (8.8)	93 (9.2)	142 (7.4)	215 (13.5)	419 (11.9)	< 0.001
COPD, <i>n</i> (%)	197 (8.4)	225 (6.3)	97 (5.7)	71 (7)	119 (6.2)	122 (7.6)	290 (8.2)	< 0.001
Asthma, <i>n</i> (%)	162 (6.9)	224 (6.3)	127 (7.4)	52 (5.1)	148 (7.7)	90 (5.6)	210 (6)	0.022
OSAS, <i>n</i> (%)	138 (5.9)	226 (6.3)	100 (5.8)	68 (6.7)	127 (6.6)	86 (5.4)	216 (6.1)	0.722
Charlson index median [IQR]	1 [0–2]	0 [0–1]	0 [0–2]	1 [0–2]	1 [0–2]	1 [0–2]	1 [0–2]	< 0.001

BMI body mass index, *IQR* interquartile range, *COPD* chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, *OSAS* obstructive sleep apnea syndrome, Severe chronic renal failure: Creatinine > 300 mg/dl or dialysis

D-dimer elevation (C6 and C7) more frequently received high doses of LMWH.

Outcomes between groups

The clusters with the highest in-hospital mortality were C4, C6, and C7 (36.8% vs. 39.3% vs. 26.4%) (Table 2; Fig. 3). It is also noteworthy that the C4 cluster with a higher analytical inflammatory component is the group with the highest requirements for HFNC, NIMV, IMV, and ICU admission. On the other hand, the C6 and C7 clusters

with greater prominence of D-dimer have high mortality but not so high requirements for HFNC, NIMV, IMV, and ICU admission.

Risk factors for in-hospital mortality

Table S4 shows the risk factors for in-hospital mortality. These included age (OR = 1.07, *p* < 0.001), female sex (OR = 0.71, *p* < 0.001), Black race (OR = 0.19, *p* = 0.032), higher BMI (OR = 1.02, *p* < 0.001), time from disease onset to admission (OR = 0.96, *p* < 0.001), higher degree

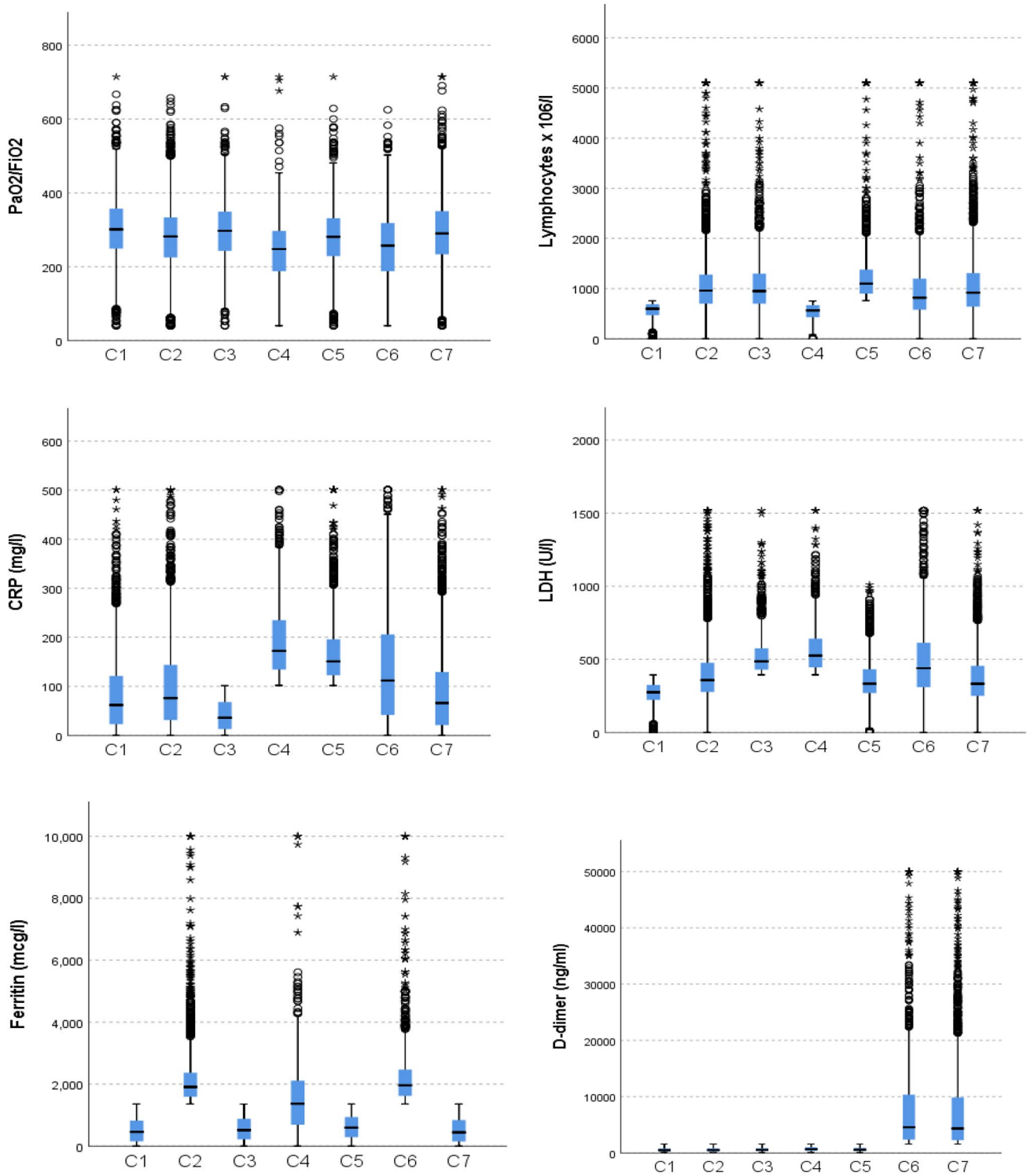


Fig. 2 Distribution of the parameters of inflammation between clusters. Mann–Whitney *U* test ($p < 0.001$ for all parameters). Each box defines the median and the 25th and 75th percentile. The whiskers define the dispersion, the circles the outliers and the asterisks the extreme values

of dependency (OR = 1.39, $p < 0.001$ for moderate and OR = 1.66, $p < 0.001$ for severe), ischemic heart disease (OR = 1.32, $p < 0.001$), higher Charlson index (OR = 1.14,

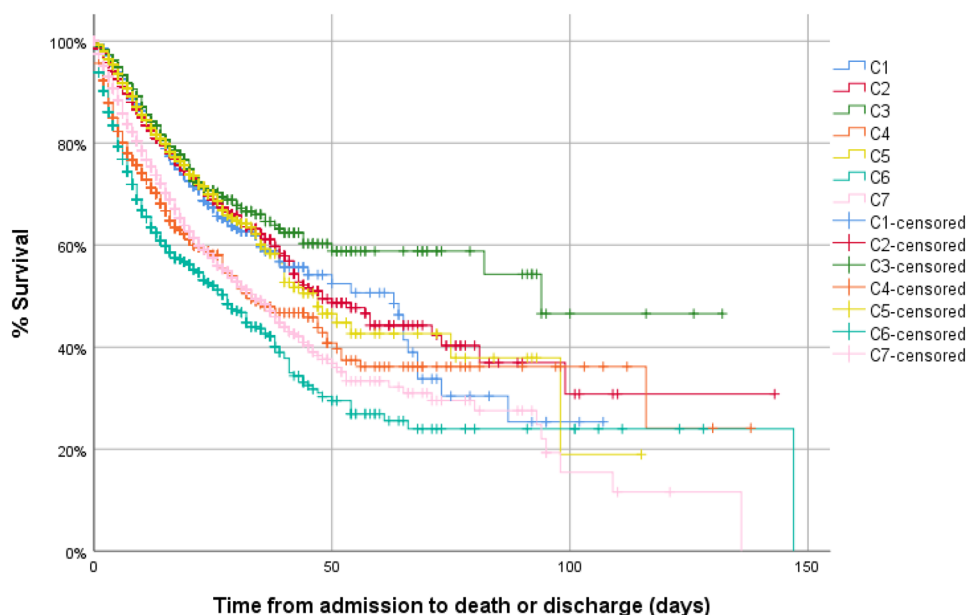
$p < 0.001$), lower PaO₂/FiO₂ (OR = 0.99, $p < 0.001$), tachypnea on admission (OR = 2.72, $p < 0.001$), and inflammation clusters. In detail and, having cluster C1 as

Table 2 Outcomes between clusters of inflammation

	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	<i>p</i> value
Primary outcome <i>n</i> (%)								
In-hospital mortality	408 (17.4)	644 (18)	267 (15.6)	373 (36.8)	336 (17.5)	628 (39.3)	932 (26.4)	<0.001
Secondary outcomes <i>n</i> (%)								
HFNC	242 (10.3)	386 (10.8)	142 (8.3)	212 (20.9)	230 (12)	205 (12.8)	292 (8.3)	<0.001
NIMV	165 (7)	252 (7.1)	93 (5.4)	138 (13.6)	118 (6.1)	125 (7.8)	181 (5.1)	<0.001
IMV	142 (6)	344 (9.6)	136 (7.9)	203 (20)	174 (9.1)	190 (11.9)	215 (6.1)	<0.001
ICU admission	213 (9.1)	429 (12)	172 (10)	249 (24.6)	229 (11.9)	222 (13.9)	277 (7.9)	<0.001

HFNC High-flow nasal cannula, NIMV non-invasive mechanical ventilation, IMV invasive mechanical ventilation, ICU intensive care unit

Fig. 3 Kaplan–Meier curves of in-hospital mortality between clusters of inflammation. C1: 17.4%, C2: 18%, C3: 15.6%, C4: 36.8%, C5: 17.5%, C6: 39.3%, C7: 26.4%; $p < 0.001$



reference, the model revealed a worse prognosis for all other clusters: C2 (OR = 1.30, $p = 0.001$), C3 (OR = 1.14, $p = 0.178$), C4 (OR = 2.28, $p < 0.001$), C5 (OR = 1.07, $p = 0.479$), C6 (OR = 2.29, $p < 0.001$), and C7 (OR = 1.28, $p = 0.001$). The drugs received during admission (steroids, remdesivir, and tocilizumab) were included in the uni- and multivariate models due to their clinical importance and statistical influence on the rest of the variables but, despite reaching statistical significance in the multivariate model, their results must be interpreted with caution since this is not the type of study to assess their efficacy. Asthma was found to be a protective factor for in-hospital death.

Discussion

In the present study, we demonstrate the presence of 7 clearly differentiated inflammation clusters. It is clear that COVID-19 elicits an exaggerated inflammatory response

but it is also clear that patients do not all become inflamed in the same way. Recently, our group had highlighted risk categories based on the degree of analytical inflammation in patients with COVID-19 at the time of hospital admission [4]. We know from that research the additive importance of such analytical inflammatory criteria. We now also know from the present study that it is important not only how many criteria the patient meets but also which ones. And this differentiation in the type of inflammation can be predicted at the time of admission. Afterward, the cascade of inflammation will continue, but the onset of inflammation already translates into differential characteristics and a very important predictive power when it comes to directing our strategies as clinicians.

The fact that the clusters with the worst prognosis C4, C6, and C7 are also those that occur in the older population suggests that age alone is not only a risk factor, but also that this is a population that is more inflamed. Whether this is due to a failure in the autoregulation

of inflammatory mechanisms inherent to age should be answered with further studies. They are also clusters with higher associated comorbidity (especially C4) and one would think that those associated diseases provide an inflammatory basis that could influence. However, the C5 cluster also has considerably associated comorbidity and yet does not have as much inflammation at entry.

Inflammation clusters add to the list of factors associated with increased in-hospital mortality in COVID-19 [13–15]. All the clusters have a worse prognosis compared to cluster C1, which we could consider the reference cluster. However, we should focus our efforts on detecting the C4, C6, and C7 clusters first, as they are really the ones with the worst prognosis. The C4 cluster presents a greater inflammatory component in the form of lymphopenia, elevated CRP and LDH, and very frequently, also elevated ferritin. It is a cluster that will evolve to acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS) and will require more HFNC, NIMV, IMV, and ICU

admission. On the contrary, cluster C7 is a cluster with a prominence of D-dimer. It also has high mortality but clearly requires less HFNC, NIMV, IMV, and ICU admission. This could translate into higher mortality from thromboembolic disease and less progression to ARDS. Finally, cluster C6 is a mixture of clusters C4 and C7, i.e., a cluster with a prominence of D-dimer but also of ferritin and, very frequently, CRP, LDH, and lymphopenia.

Whether these 7 clusters respond to different pathways of inflammation and perhaps respond to genetic differences that condition a different host response to the same external aggression of SARS-CoV-2 is something that we cannot answer with the present study. As we have discussed previously, the inflammation cascade in patients with COVID-19 does not occur equally in all patients. In Fig. 4, we propose a logical sequence in the inflammation of these patients. It is based on the analytical characteristics of each of them and the additive possibilities. It also has a pathophysiological

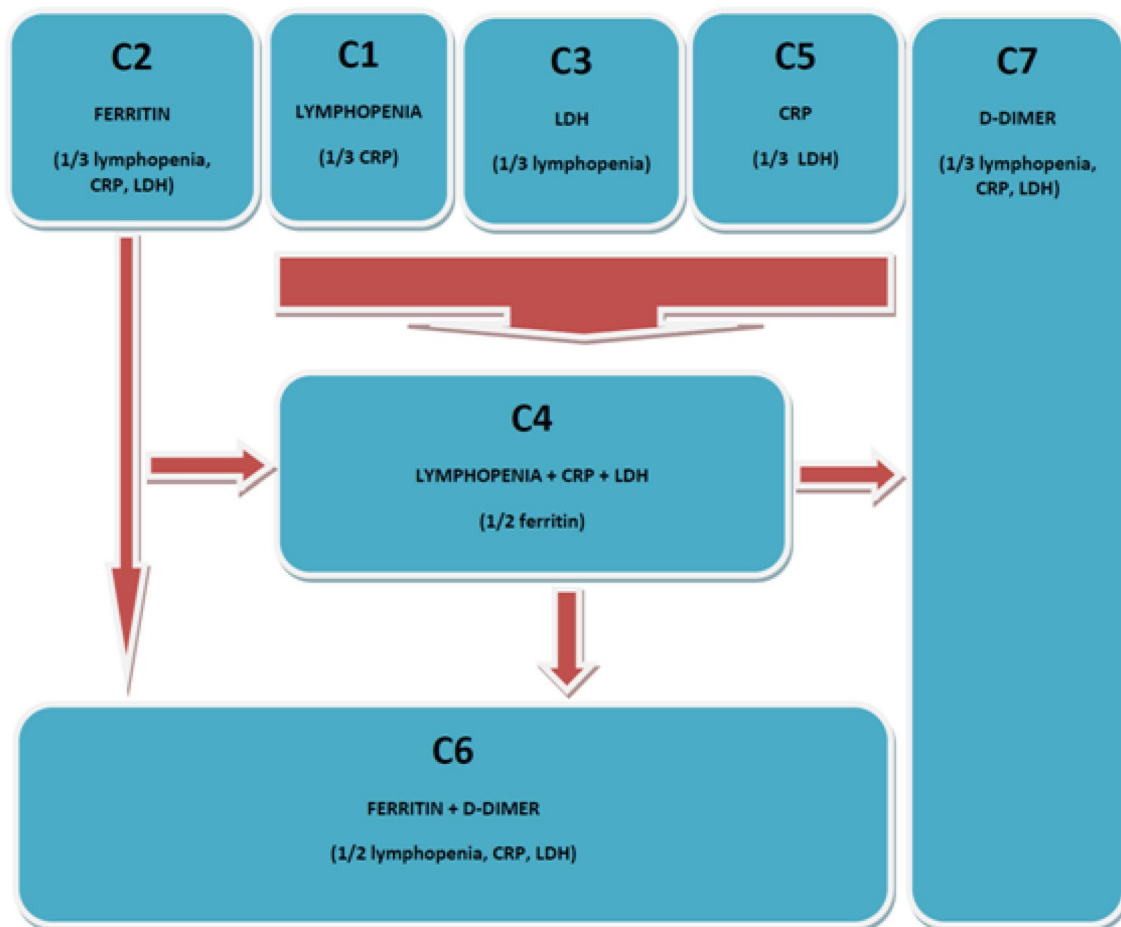


Fig. 4 Proposed algorithm for analytic inflammatory pathways in patients with COVID-19. It is based on the analytical characteristics of each of them and the additive possibilities. The initiation of the inflammatory cascade in COVID-19 is defined by macrophage activation. This includes elevation of LDH, IL6, CRP, ferritin, and cyto-

penias. After this first step, vascular endothelial damage occurs and there appears the elevation of D-dimer. Cluster C7 suggests that there is a group of patients who present endothelial damage with subsequent micro- or macrothrombosis without going through a previous step of major inflammation

logic behind it as the initiation of the inflammatory cascade in COVID-19 is defined by macrophage activation. This includes elevation of LDH, IL6, CRP, ferritin, and cytopenias. Why some patients elevate some parameters earlier and other patients elevate others is unknown. After this first step, vascular endothelial damage occurs and there appears the elevation of D-dimer.

From such a model, there are several comments to consider. First, there are 3 clusters that should sound the alarm when detected, such as clusters C4, C6, and C7. They translate more advanced stages of the disease and early action should be taken to block such escalation. On the other hand, cluster C2 does not represent such an advanced stage of inflammation but possibly the transition to cluster C6 is just around the corner in these patients (compared to clusters C1, C3, and C5 where we would have more room for maneuver). Thus, ferritin and D-dimer should be the key indicators of increased risk in patients hospitalized for COVID-19. Finally, cluster C7 suggests that there is a group of patients who present endothelial damage with subsequent micro- or macrothrombosis without going through a previous step of major inflammation. This is a puzzling fact that should make us rethink the doses of LMWH in patients with little inflammation.

Of all the treatments tested in COVID-19, it is the immunosuppressants/immunomodulators (corticosteroids and tocilizumab) that have demonstrated the greatest effectiveness to date [16–25]. They are especially indicated in those patients with analytical parameters of inflammation such as the patients included in the present study. However, it is plausible to think that their effectiveness is not the same in all inflammation clusters. We believe that perhaps in C4 (with a greater inflammatory component) and even C6 they could clearly demonstrate their benefit but perhaps in C7, with a greater role of D-dimer, they might not be so useful.

In conclusion, the present study identifies 7 inflammation groups based on the presence of lymphopenia, elevated CRP, LDH, ferritin, and D-dimer at the time of hospital admission for COVID-19. Clusters C4 (lymphopenia + LDH + CRP), C6 (ferritin + D-dimer), and C7 (D-dimer) were the worst prognostic clusters in terms of in-hospital mortality.

Appendix

List of the SEMI-COVID-19 Network members

Coordinator of the SEMI-COVID-19 Registry: José Manuel Casas Rojo.

SEMI-COVID-19 Scientific Committee Members: José Manuel Casas Rojo, José Manuel Ramos Rincón, Carlos Lumberras Bermejo, Jesús Millán Núñez-Cortés, Juan Miguel Antón Santos, Ricardo Gómez Huelgas.

Members of the SEMI-COVID-19 Group

H. Univ. de Bellvitge. L'Hospitalet de Llobregat (Barcelona)

Xavier Corbella, Narcís A. Homs, Abelardo Montero, Jose María Mora-Luján, Francesc Formiga, Joan Albà-Albalate, Manuel Rubio-Rivas.

H. U. 12 de Octubre. Madrid

Paloma Agudo de Blas, Coral Arévalo Cañas, Blanca Ayuso, José Bascuñana Morejón, Samara Campos Escudero, María Carnevali Frías, Santiago Cossio Tejido, Borja de Miguel Campo, Carmen Díaz Pedroche, Raquel Díaz Simon, Ana García Reyne, Laura Ibarra Veganzones, Lucía Jorge Huerta, Antonio Lalueza Blanco, Jaime Laureiro Gonzalo, Jaime Lora-Tamayo, Carlos Lumberras Bermejo, Guillermo Maestro de la Calle, Rodrigo Miranda Godoy, Barbara Otero Perpiña, Diana Paredes Ruiz, Marcos Sánchez Fernández, Javier Tejada Montes.

H. Costa del Sol. Marbella (Málaga)

Victoria Agustín Bandera, Javier García Alegría, Nicolás Jiménez-García, Jairo Luque del Pino, María Dolores Martín Escalante, Francisco Navarro Romero, Victoria Nuñez Rodríguez, Julián Olalla Sierra.

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Sánchez Santiuste, Patricia Serrano de la Fuente, Pablo Tutor de Ureta, Ángela Valencia Alijo, Mercedes Valentín-Pastrana Aguilar, Juan Antonio Vargas Núñez, Jose Manuel Vázquez Comendador, Gema Vázquez Contreras, Carmen Vizoso Gálvez.

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José F. Varona Arche.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11739-021-02924-4>.

Acknowledgements We gratefully acknowledge all the investigators who participate in the SEMI-COVID-19 Registry. We also thank the SEMI-COVID-19 Registry Coordinating Center for their quality control data, logistic and administrative support.

Funding This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare they have no conflict of interest.

Statement of human and animal rights The study has been approved by the ethics committee of Bellvitge University Hospital.

Informed consent Informed consent was obtained from the subjects.

Authorship All authors had access to the data and a role in writing this manuscript.


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Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Authors and Affiliations

Manuel Rubio-Rivas¹  · José María Mora-Luján¹ · Francesc Formiga¹ · Miguel Ángel Corrales González² · María del Mar García Andreu³ · Víctor Moreno-Torres⁴ · Gema María García García⁵ · José N Alcalá Pedrajas⁶ · Ramon Boixeda⁷ · Leticia Pérez-Lluna⁸ · Begoña Cortés-Rodríguez⁹ · Carmen Mella-Pérez¹⁰ · María de la Sierra Navas Alcántara¹¹ · Manuel Lorenzo López Reboiro¹² · Verónica Alfaro-Lara¹³ · Santiago Pérez-Martín¹⁴ · José Ángel Martín-Oterino¹⁵ · Anyuli Gracia Gutiérrez¹⁶ · Anabel Martín-Urda Díez-Canseco¹⁷ · Pere Comas Casanova¹⁸ · Cristina Pérez García¹⁹ · José F Varona^{20,21} · Ricardo Gómez-Huelgas^{22,23} · Juan-Miguel Antón-Santos²⁴ · Carlos Lumbreras-Bermejo²⁵ on behalf of the SEMI-COVID-19 Network

José María Mora-Luján
jmora@bellvitgehospital.cat

Francesc Formiga
fformiga@bellvitgehospital.cat

Miguel Ángel Corrales González
Dr.corralesg@gmail.com

María del Mar García Andreu
mariadelmargarciaandreu@gmail.com

Víctor Moreno-Torres
victor.moreno.torres.1988@gmail.com

Gema María García García
geminway21@hotmail.com

José N Alcalá Pedrajas
Jnalcala58@hotmail.com

Ramon Boixeda
Rboixeda@csgdm.cat

Leticia Pérez-Lluna
doctoraperezlluna@gmail.com

Begoña Cortés-Rodríguez
begocortesrod@gmail.com

Carmen Mella-Pérez
mellacarmen@gmail.com

María de la Sierra Navas Alcántara
maria.sierra.navas@gmail.com

Manuel Lorenzo López Reboiro
manuel.lorenzo.lopez.reboiro@sergas.es

Verónica Alfaro-Lara
valfarolara@hotmail.com

Santiago Pérez-Martín
santino_perez@hotmail.com

José Ángel Martín-Oterino
jmoterino@saludcastillayleon.es

Anyuli Gracia Gutiérrez
agraciagut@gmail.com

Anabel Martín-Urda Díez-Canseco
anabelmartinurda10canseco@gmail.com

Pere Comas Casanova
23575pcc@comb.cat

Cristina Pérez García
saraaloe@hotmail.com

José F Varona
jfvarona@hmospiales.com

Ricardo Gómez-Huelgas
ricardogomezhueltas@hotmail.com

Juan-Miguel Antón-Santos
jmanton.hugf@salud.madrid.org

Carlos Lumbreras-Bermejo
clumbrerasb@gmail.com

- 1 Department of Internal Medicine, Bellvitge University Hospital, Bellvitge Biomedical Research Institute-IDIBELL, University of Barcelona, L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, 08907 Barcelona, Spain
- 2 Department of Internal Medicine, Costa del Sol Hospital. Marbella, Málaga, Spain
- 3 Department of Internal Medicine, Royo Villanova Hospital, Zaragoza, Spain
- 4 Department of Internal Medicine, Puerta de Hierro University Hospital, Majadahonda, Madrid, Spain
- 5 Department of Internal Medicine, Badajoz University Hospital, Badajoz, Spain
- 6 Department of Internal Medicine, Pozoblanco Hospital. Pozoblanco, Córdoba, Spain
- 7 Department of Internal Medicine, Mataró Hospital, Barcelona, Spain
- 8 Department of Internal Medicine, Sagunto Hospital. Sagunto, Valencia, Spain

9 Department of Internal Medicine, Alto Guadalquivir Hospital. Andújar, Jaén, Spain

10 Department of Internal Medicine, Ferrol Clinical University Hospital, El Ferrol, La Coruña, Spain

11 Department of Internal Medicine, Infanta Margarita Hospital. Cabra, Córdoba, Spain

12 Department of Internal Medicine, Monforte de Lemos Hospital, Monforte de Lemos, Lugo, Spain

13 Department of Internal Medicine, Virgen del Rocío University Hospital, Sevilla, Spain

14 Department of Internal Medicine, Marina Baixa Hospital, Villajoyosa, Alicante, Spain

15 Department of Internal Medicine, Salamanca University Hospital, Salamanca, Spain

16 Department of Internal Medicine, Defense General Hospital, Zaragoza, Spain

17 Department of Internal Medicine, Palamós Hospital. Palamós, Girona, Spain

18 Department of Internal Medicine, Blanes Hospital, Blanes, Spain

19 Department of Internal Medicine, Do Salnes Hospital, Vilagarcía de Arousa, Pontevedra, Spain

20 Department of Internal Medicine, HM Montepíncipe University Hospital, Madrid, Spain

21 School of Medicine, San Pablo University-CEU, Madrid, Spain

22 Department of Internal Medicine, Málaga Regional University Hospital, Biomedical Research Institute of Málaga (IBIMA), University of Málaga (UMA), Málaga, Spain

23 CIBER Obesidad Y Nutricion (CIBERobn), ISCIII, Madrid, Spain

24 Department of Internal Medicine. Infanta, Cristina University Hospital, Parla, Madrid, Spain

25 Department of Internal Medicine, 12 de Octubre University Hospital, Madrid, Spain