Antibody response to mRNA SARS-CoV-2 vaccine among dialysis patients – a prospective cohort study

Timna Agur[1,2*], Naomi Ben-Dor[1,2*], Shira Goldman[1,2], Shelly Lichtenberg[1,2], Michal Herman-Edelstein [1,2] Dafna Yahav[2,3], Benaya Rozen-Zvi[1,2] and Boris Zingerman[1,2]

[1]Department of Nephrology and Hypertension, Rabin Medical Center, Petah-Tikva, Israel

[2] Sackler Faculty of Medicine, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel

[3] Infectious Diseases Unit, Rabin Medical Center, Beilinson Campus, Petah-Tikva, Israel

*TA and NBD contributed equally for this work

Correspondence to: Timna Agur; E-mail: Timna.Agur@clalit.org.il

Emerging data established end stage renal disease (ESRD) as one of the highest risk comorbidities for severe COVID-19, with short-term mortality above 20% [1, 2]. Based on both a large clinical trial and real-life data from Israel in the general populations, the effectiveness of mRNA-based BNT162b2 vaccine against SARS-CoV-2 was estimated at 95% [3, 4]. Nevertheless, dialysis patients present diminished immune response following immunization with various vaccines, and the efficacy of the available SARS-CoV-2 vaccine among this vulnerable group is unknown [5]. Therefore, we performed a prospective study, evaluating antibody response among hemodialysis and peritoneal dialysis (PD) patients 2-6 weeks after receiving the second dose of BNT162b2.

The study included hemodialysis and PD patients who were vaccinated with 2 doses of BNT162b2 vaccine, 21 days apart. Patients treated with current chemotherapy or immunosuppressive drugs, those who had only one vaccine dose, those who had been infected by COVID-19 before or those who were unable to give consent were excluded. To confirm sustained response, consenting participants were evaluated 2-6 weeks after receiving the second vaccine dose and were followed for up to 8 weeks. The study was approved by the ethics committee of RMC. Demographic data were collected by interview and medical records and blood samples for anti-spike (anti-S) SARS-CoV-2 antibodies were collected during the routine dialysis visits. SARS-CoV-2 IgG II Quant (Abbott©) assay was used for quantitative measurement of anti-spike IgG antibodies of SARS-CoV-2. A test was considered as positive if IgG was above 50 AU/m[6]. The primary outcome was the rate of seropositivity for anti-S antibodies. Univariate and multivariate linear regression analyses were performed to explore

factors associated with higher log transformed antibody titer. The results are presented as change of log transformed antibody level per unit of explanatory variable (B).

Overall, 122 hemodialysis patients were included in the study (Fig. S-1). Patients' characteristics are detailed in Table 1. At a median time of 36 days (IQR 32-40, range 10-48 days) from the second immunization dose, 114 (93.4%) of the 122 hemodialysis patients, were seropositive for anti-S IgG. The geometric mean of anti-S titer was 1190.8 AU/ml, median level was 1599 AU/mL (IQR 419.5-3976.9 AU/ml) and the mean log transformed anti-S level was 3.08±0.84 logAU/ml.

Factors associated with non-response (≥50 AU/mL) were lower serum albumin (3.41±0.56 vs 3.99±0.35, p<0.001) and higher intravenous iron sucrose dose (median dose (IQR) 150 mg/week (62.5 -300) vs 50 mg/week (0-100), p=0.003) in non-responders and responders, respectively.

Younger age (B 0.021 per year decrease, 95% CI 0.011-0.031, p<0.001), serum albumin above 3.5 gr/dl (B 1.039, 95% CI 0.65-1.429, p<0.001), lower intravenous iron dose (B 0.002 per mg/week decrease, 95% CI 0.00-0.004, p=0.009) and BMI under 30 (B 0.394, 95% CI 0.107-0.681, p=0.008) were associated with higher log transformed antibody titer in a multivariate analysis (Table S-1).

Of the 23 PD patients, 22 (95.6%) were seropositive for anti-S IgG. The geometric mean of anti-S titer was 1515.14 AU/ml, median level was 1560 AU/mL (IQR 254.8-6423 AU/ml) and the mean log transformed antibody level was 3.18±0.83 logAU/ml. There was no significant difference between the mean antibody titer of PD and hemodialysis patients (p=0.58). Younger age (B 0.034 per year decrease, 95% CI 0.009-0.06, p=0.011) and serum albumin above 3.5 gr/dl (B 1.147, 95% CI 0.536-1.758, p<0.001) were associated with higher log transformed antibody

titer in a univariate analysis. Due to the small PD cohort, multivariate analysis was not performed.

Only two major adverse events following any vaccine dose were reported among 145 cohort participants. Major adverse events included: one syncope event, one day following the 1st vaccination dose (hemodialysis patient), and one pericarditis event two days following 2nd vaccination dose (PD patient).

Seropositivity rates following BNT162b2 vaccination in both hemodialysis and PD patients were high and comparable to the seropositivity rates reported in healthy volunteers[7]. Overall, 114 hemodialysis patients (93.4%) and 22 PD patients (95.6%) were seropositive for SARS-CoV-2 anti-S IgG at 2-6 weeks following the second dose of BNT162b2 vaccination. Recently, similar high seropositivity rates were also reported by Grupper et al. among 56 hemodialysis patients as well as in a control group of 95 health workers [8].

Factors associated with higher log transformed S1-binding antibodies titers in hemodialysis patients included younger age, BMI under 30, serum albumin above 3.5gr/dl and reduced intravenous iron dose. In line with our findings, Grupper et al. also demonstrated a significant inverse correlation between older age and antibodies levels in the hemodialysis group as well as in the control group[8]. Nutritional status is a known risk factor for dampened antibody response to immunization in dialysis patients[5, 9]. Hypoalbuminemia as a marker of malnutrition and inflammatory state, has been also shown to correlate with diminished seroconversion in response to hepatitis B (HBV) vaccine [10, 11]. However, higher BMI, which is often associated with improved nutritional state and outcome in dialysis patients, was previously reported to corelate with inferior response to HBV vaccine[10, 12]. Both iron deficiency and iron overload are

associated with impaired immune reactivity. Intravenous iron supplementation was found to be associated with reduced antibody response in our study, as well as in a previous study that found that intravenous iron blunted the humoral response to HBV vaccination[13].

Our study has several limitations. First, correlation between antibody response to vaccine and protection against SARS-CoV-2 infection has not yet been proven. Nevertheless, evidence is accumulating to support antibody response as a potential correlate of disease protection. Furthermore, we did not include neutralization antibodies and cellular immunity assays in our study. However, a strong correlation has been reported between anti-S antibody titers and neutralization antibody levels[7, 14, 15].

In conclusion, in our cohort, high seropositivity rates above 90% were demonstrated among 122 hemodialysis and 23 PD patients following BNT162b2 vaccination, with few serious adverse events. Younger age, BMI under 30, normal albumin level and reduced intravenous iron dose were associated with elevated anti-S antibody titers in hemodialysis patients. These findings strongly support the efficacy of the BNT162b2 vaccination among dialysis patients.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

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Table 1. Baseline characteristics of the hemodialysis cohort according to antibody response

Variable name	All (122)	Response (114)[#]	No response (8)	p
Age (years)	71.57±12.87	71.1±13.02	78.38±8.47	0.123
Female gender	41 (33.6%)	38 (33.3%)	3 (37.5%)	0.809
Dialysis vintage (months)	39.73±32.59	39.77±33.06	39.07±26.84	0.953
Primary kidney disease				
Diabetic nephropathy	55 (45.1%)	54 (47.4%)	1 (12.5%)	
Hypertensive kidney disease	27 (22.1%)	25 (21.9%)	2 (25%)	0.105
Glomerulonephritis	14 (11.5%)	13 (11.4%)	1 (12.5%)	
ADPKD	5 (4.1%)	3 (2.6%)	2 (25%)	
Other/unknown *	21 (17.2%)	19 (16.7%)	2 (25%)	
Diabetes mellitus	70 (57.4%)	66 (57.9%)	4 (50%)	0.662
Ischemic heart disease	64 (52.5%)	58 (50.9%)	6 (75%)	0.187
History of malignancy	24 (19.7%)	21 (18.4%)	3 (37.5%)	0.189
History of transplantation	8 (6.6%)	7 (6.1%)	1 (12.5%)	0.482
Jugular catheter as dialysis access	57 (46.7%)	54 (47.4%)	3 (37.5%)	0.589
KT/V	1.44±0.28	1.45±0.28	1.36±0.32	0.395
nPCR (gr/kg/day)	1.09±0.27	1.1±0.27	0.94±0.22	0.113
Anuria	59 (48.4%)	56 (49.1%)	3 (37.5%)	0.525
BMI (kg/m2)	26.69±5.51	26.73±5.51	26.16±5.89	0.781
Obesity (BMI>30)	31 (25.4%)	29 (25.4%)	2 (25%)	0.978
Serum albumin (per gr/dL)	3.95±0.39	3.99±0.35	3.41±0.56	<0.001
Hypoalbuminemia (Albumin<3.5gr/dl)	15 (12.3%)	11 (9.6%)	4 (50%)	0.001
Hemoglobin (gr/dL)	10.63±1.13	10.6±1.12	11.05±1.3	0.278
Transferrin saturation (percent)	26.65±10.98	26.65±11.29	26.69±5.6	0.993
Ferritin level (mg/dl)	610 (349-902)	713 (339-857)	579 (349-906)	0.905
Time from 2nd vaccine dose (days)	34.94±8	35.06±7.96	33.25±8.94	0.538
ESA dose (unit per week)	6000 (3000-13000)	6000 (3000-12250)	10125 (2625-17500)	0.566
Iron dose (mg/week)	50 (0-100)	50 (0-100)	150 (62.5-300)	0.003

*# Response - above 50 AU/ml * Including: urinary tract obstruction (3), CACUT (3), cardio-renal syndrome (3), myeloma kidney (1), cholesterol emboli (1), obesity related FSGS (2) and unknown (8)*

Abbreviations: BMI- body mass index; nPCR- normalized protein catabolic rate; ESA - erythropoietin stimulating agents; CACUT- congenital anomaly of kidney and urinary tract; FSGS – focal segmental glomerulosclerosis