Treatment Outcomes in Multidrug-Resistant Tuberculosis.
Günther, G; Lange, C; Alexandru, S; Altet, N; Avsar, K; Bang, D; Barbuta, R; Bothamley, G; Ciobanu, A; Crudu, V; Danilovits, M; Dedicoat, M; Duarte, R; Gualano, G; Kunst, H; de Lange, W; Leimane, V; Magis-Escurra, C; McLaughlin, A-M; Muylle, I; Polcová, V; Popa, C; Rumetshofer, R; Skrahina, A; Solodovnikova, V; Spinu, V; Tiberi, S; Viiklepp, P; van Leth, F; for TBNET,
suggests ZIKV as the primary flavivirus infection. The limited antibody response in Patient 2 was presumably due to her ongoing immunosuppressive therapy. Although neither patient reported symptoms associated with ZIKV infection during the investigation, these data show evidence for ZIKV transmission by means of platelet transfusion.

Iara J.F. Motta, M.D.
Instituto Nacional de Câncer José Alencar Gomes da Silva
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Bryan R. Spencer, M.P.H.
American Red Cross, Massachusetts Region
Dedham, MA

Orlando C. Ferreira, Jr., M.D., Ph.D.
Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
orlandocfj@gmail.com

and Others

Dr. Motta and Mr. Spencer contributed equally to this letter. A complete list of authors is available with the full text of this letter at NEJM.org.

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TO THE EDITOR: Despite lengthy treatment with costly second-line drug regimens, curing multidrug-resistant (MDR) tuberculosis (bacillary resistance to at least isoniazid and rifampin) remains a challenge. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines “cure” as “treatment completion” with at least three negative cultures after the intensive phase of therapy in the absence of “treatment failure.” The definition of “treatment failure” requires early termination of treatment or the need for permanent regimen change of at least two antituberculosis drugs. “Treatment success” is defined as the sum of cure and treatment completion.

We evaluated treatment outcomes according to WHO definitions in the TBNET cohort of 380 patients with MDR tuberculosis at 23 European centers, including 89 patients with pre–extensively drug-resistant (XDR) tuberculosis and 33 patients with XDR tuberculosis, and compared them with simplified definitions of MDR tuberculosis treatment outcomes (see the Supplementary Appendix, available with the full text of this letter at NEJM.org). Cure was defined as a negative culture status 6 months after treatment initiation, no positive culture thereafter, and no relapses within 1 year after treatment completion. Treatment failure was defined as a positive culture status 6 months after treatment initiation or thereafter or a relapse within 1 year after treatment completion. An undeclared outcome was defined as an outcome that was not assessed (owing to transferral out of the cohort, no culture status at 6 months while the patient was receiving care, or no post-treatment assessment). Death was defined as death during observation. Loss to follow-up was defined as nonreceipt of care 6 months after treatment initiation.

Fifty of 88 patients with treatment failure (57%) were not identified by the WHO definition. Assessment of WHO-defined cure was possible for only 13% of the patients in countries with a low incidence of tuberculosis (with a notification rate <20 per 100,000 population), 58% of the patients in countries with an intermediate incidence (with a notification rate of 20 to 100 per 100,000 population), and 52% of the patients in countries with a high incidence (with a notification rate >100 per 100,000 population), owing to a lack of sputum cultures obtained after the intensive-treatment phase. This could reflect the limited access to health care of mostly foreign-born patients or the inability of patients to produce sputum in the latter stages of therapy.
WHO-defined treatment success in MDR tuberculosis is predominantly driven by completing treatment rather than by a biologic end point and fails to address relapse-free survival as a clinically more relevant assessment of treatment efficacy.

Relapse-free cure was achieved in 61% of the patients with MDR tuberculosis, 52% of the patients with pre-XDR tuberculosis, and 39% of the patients with XDR tuberculosis when simplified definitions were used, in contrast to WHO-defined cure in 31%, 27%, and 24% of patients, respectively (Fig. 1).

Of the 318 patients with a negative culture status at 6 months, 35 (11%) reverted in the continuation phase, and 9 (3%) had a post-treatment relapse, findings that suggest that culture status at 6 months may be a reliable predictor of relapse-free cure in patients with MDR tuberculosis.5

In conclusion, current WHO definitions may underestimate cure in patients with MDR tuberculosis. These definitions could be simplified while incorporating the assessment of post-treatment relapse.

Gunar Günther, M.D., M.P.H.
Christoph Lange, M.D., Ph.D.
Research Center Borstel
Borstel, Germany
clange@fz-borstel.de

Sofia Alexandru, M.D.
Institute of Phtisiopneumology
Chisinau, Moldova

Neus Altet, M.D.
Hospital Universitari Vall d’Hebron
Barcelona, Spain

Figure 1. Culture Conversion, Subsequent Reversion, and Outcomes of Tuberculosis Treatment According to Simplified and WHO Definitions.

Panel A shows culture conversion to negative cultures in all patients with a positive culture at the start of second-line treatment for tuberculosis. Panel B shows reversion to positive cultures in patients in whom culture conversion occurred during the study. Panel C shows final outcome according to proposed simplified definitions. Panel D shows final outcome according to World Health Organization (WHO) definitions. Multidrug-resistant (MDR) tuberculosis was defined as bacillary resistance to at least isoniazid and rifampin but excluding pre–extensively drug-resistant (XDR) tuberculosis and XDR tuberculosis. Pre-XDR tuberculosis was defined as bacillary resistance to isoniazid and rifampin and either any fluoroquinolone or any second-line injectable drug. XDR tuberculosis was defined as bacillary resistance to isoniazid and rifampin, any fluoroquinolone, and any second-line injectable drug (amikacin, capreomycin, or kanamycin).
Korkut Avsar, M.D., Ph.D.
Asklepios Klinik Gauting
Gauting, Germany

Didi Bang, M.D., Ph.D.
Statens Serum Institut
Copenhagen, Denmark

Raisa Barbuta, M.D.
Balti Municipal Hospital
Balti, Moldova

Graham Bothamley, M.D., Ph.D.
Homerton University Hospital
London, United Kingdom

Ana Ciobanu, M.D.
Valeniu Crudu, M.D., Ph.D.
Institute of Phthisiopneumology
Chisinau, Moldova

Manfred Danilovits, M.D.
Tartu University Lung Hospital
Tartu, Estonia

Martin Dedicoat, M.D., Ph.D.
Heart of England Foundation Trust
Birmingham, United Kingdom

Raquel Duarte, M.D., Ph.D.
Porto University
Porto, Portugal

Gina Gualano, M.D.
Lazzaro Spallanzani National Institute for Infectious Diseases
Rome, Italy

Heinke Kunst, M.D.
Queen Mary University Hospital
London, United Kingdom

Wiel de Lange, M.D.
University Medical Center Groningen
Groningen, the Netherlands

Vaira Leimane, M.D.
Riga East University Hospital
Riga, Latvia

Cecile Magis-Escurra, M.D., Ph.D.
Radboud University Medical Center
Nijmegen, the Netherlands

Anne-Marie McLaughlin, M.D.
St. James’s Hospital
Dublin, Ireland

Rudolf Rumetshofer, M.D.
Otto Wagner Hospital
Vienna, Austria

Alena Skrahina, M.D.
Varvara Solodovnikova, M.D.
Republican Research and Practical Center for Pulmonology
and Tuberculosis
Minsk, Belarus

Victor Spinu, M.D.
Marius-Nasta-Institut
Bucharest, Romania

Simona Tiberi, M.D.
Barts Health NHS Trust
London, United Kingdom

Piret Viiklepp, M.D.
National Institute for Health Development
Tallinn, Estonia

Frank van Leth, M.D., Ph.D.
Amsterdam Institute for Global Health and Development
Amsterdam, the Netherlands

for TBNET

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