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PII: S0923-7534(20)36387-0

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annonc.2020.03.300>

Reference: ANNONC 141

To appear in: *Annals of Oncology*

Received Date: 24 March 2020

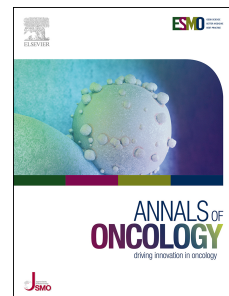
Revised Date: 26 March 2020

Accepted Date: 27 March 2020

Please cite this article as: Michot JM, Albiges L, Chaput N, Saada V, Pommeret F, Griscelli F, Balleyguier C, Besse B, Marabelle A, Netzer F, Merad M, Robert C, Barlesi F, Gachot B, Stoclin A, Tocilizumab, an anti-IL6 receptor antibody, to treat Covid-19-related respiratory failure: a case report, *Annals of Oncology* (2020), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annonc.2020.03.300>.

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Tocilizumab, an anti-IL6 receptor antibody, to treat Covid-19-related respiratory failure: a case report

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Running title: Tocilizumab to treat respiratory failure related to Covid-19

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Article type: letter to the editor

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Running title: tocilizumab to treat respiratory failure related to Covid-19

Words: 878

Figures: 2

References: 10

Letter to the editor.

The pathogenesis of coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) remains unclear and there is presently no evidence for efficient therapeutics. The pathogenesis of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) related to coronavirus involves a cytokine storm with high serum levels of pro-inflammatory cytokines and chemokines interleukin 6 (IL-6), tumor necrosis factor (TNF-alpha), interferon-gamma, IL-1 and IL-12, and IL-8 [1–4]. Similarly, in Covid-19, higher plasma levels of cytokines IL-6, IL-2, IL-7, IL-10, interferon gamma inducible protein (IP10), monocyte chemo attractant protein (MCP1), macrophage inflammatory protein (MIP1A) and TNF-alpha have been found in patients admitted to intensive care units, and the cytokine storm syndrome was proportional to the severity of disease [5]. The proinflammatory IL-6 appears as one of the key cytokines leading to the inflammatory storm, which may result in increased alveolar-capillary blood-gas exchange dysfunction [4, 6]. The pro-inflammatory cytokine IL-6 seems to have a prominent role in this inflammatory cascade [4].

These data suggest that IL-6 may be a potential actionable target cytokine to treat Covid-19-related acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS). We report here the case of a patient with a respiratory failure linked to Covid-19 who had a rapid favorable outcome after two infusions of the anti-interleukin 6 receptor inhibitor tocilizumab. This suggests that anti-IL6 receptor inhibitor treatment could decrease the risk of progression toward SARS by mitigating the cytokine storm in the lungs with Covid-19.

Case description

A 42-year-old male recently diagnosed with metastatic sarcomatoid clear cell renal cell carcinoma, had been hospitalized for fever, symptomatic bone metastases pain management and first-line systemic treatment decisions. The patient had no other significant medical history. He presented initially with isolated fever of 39.0°C on March 12th, 2020 for which he received ceftriaxone outside our center. On Day 6, he developed mild cough and fever (38.3°C) prompting SARS-Cov-2 real time polymerase chain reaction test, which was positive. The patient was

admitted to the Covid-19 ward of our hospital and closely monitored. Chest computerized tomography (CT) scan revealed bilateral patchy ground glass opacities related to Covid-19 (**Figure 1**). Antiviral therapy lopinavir-ritonavir use (400mg-100mg orally) was begun at D7 and maintained for 5 days, according to local guidelines. On day 8, sudden dyspnea and saturation drop required oxygen supplementation increase to 6 l/min, without the need for artificial ventilation. He received two doses of tocilizumab, at 8 mg/kg intravenously for each dose, 8 hours apart, with a good tolerability. Thereafter, he experienced clinical improvement, rapidly afebrile and with gradually decreased oxygen consumption. This was fully discontinued on day 12 (**Figure 1**). Chest CT on day 12 confirmed improvement by showing partial regression of the pulmonary infiltrates and ground glass appearance (**Figure 1**). C-reactive protein in blood, a surrogate marker of cytokine storm, decreased from 225 mg/L to 33 mg/L in 4 days (**Figure 1**). No major change was observed in circulating lymphocytic subpopulations after tocilizumab, and the percentage of CD4 + CD25 + lymphocytes was found high, before and after tocilizumab. (**Figure 2**). The Patient ultimately clinically fully recovered from Covid-19 symptoms.

Discussion and conclusion.

As a recombinant humanized anti-human IL-6 receptor monoclonal antibody, tocilizumab can specifically bind soluble IL-6 receptor and inhibit signal transduction [7]. Tocilizumab is currently mainly used to treat patients with rheumatoid arthritis. It is given every 4 weeks, for up to 24 weeks, with a favorable safety profile [8]. Other indications for tocilizumab are juvenile arthritis, giant cell arthritis, and -- more recently-- cytokine release syndromes associated with chimeric antigen receptor T cell therapies [7, 9]. In these mainly rheumatologic indications, the tolerance of tocilizumab is generally good, the main adverse events are a transient decrease in leukocytes and increase in liver enzymes and a slight increase of bacterial infection [7,8]. In patients with Covid-19, the safety profile, and especially the potential drug interactions with antivirals, remain to be investigated in clinical trials. Clinical trials are also required to explore whether tocilizumab can be used effectively in patients with respiratory failure due to COVID-19 and to investigate at what stage of the disease this treatment could be the most appropriate.

Here we report the first successful treatment of a patient with respiratory failure related to Covid-19 and treated with tocilizumab. The present report has several limitations. First, the patient was immunosuppressed because of

his cancer, and this case is therefore not generalizable to the non-cancer population. Interestingly, his lymphocytic subpopulation presented high level of senescence, as frequently observed in cancer patients (data not shown). To what extent this could explain sensitivity to tocilizumab should be further explored. Second, the patient received concomitant therapies, especially lopinavir-ritonavir, but it seems unlikely this changed the disease trajectory, since lopinavir-ritonavir has recently been shown not to be effective in patients with severe Covid-19 in a randomized controlled trial [10]. It thus seems likely that the rapid control of the pulmonary hyperinflammation resulted from tocilizumab treatment.

In summary, Covid-19 with hyperinflammatory pulmonary symptoms is associated with a cytokine storm involving interleukins and chemokine dysregulation. Among these, the actionable proinflammatory interleukin 6 axis seems to play a major role. We report the first observation of a patient with severe Covid-19-related lung disease successfully treated with anti-interleukin 6 receptor treatment. Blocking the cytokine axis IL6 appears to us a promising therapy to be studied urgently in patients developing severe acute respiratory syndrome related to coronavirus.

Funding:

None

Disclosure:**Dr Jean-Marie Michot**

JMM reports sponsored Research at Gustave Roussy Cancer Center with Abbvie, Agios, Amgen, Astex, AstraZeneca, Bayer, Beigene, Blueprint, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Boeringer Ingelheim, Celgene, Chugai, Forma, Genentech, GSK, H3 biomedecine, Incyte, Innate Pharma, Janssen, Lilly, Loxo, Medimmune, MSD, Novartis, Oncopeptides AB, Roche, Sanofi, Taiho, Xencor, outside the submitted work, and personal fees or travel grants or ad-board: Astex, Iqone, Mundipharma, Bristol-Myers Squibb, outside the submitted work.

Pr Benjamin Besse

BB reports sponsored Research at Gustave Roussy Cancer Center with Abbvie, Amgen, AstraZeneca, BeiGene, Blueprint Medicines, BMS, Boehringer Ingelheim, Celgene, Cristal Therapeutics, Daiichi-Sankyo, Eli Lilly, GSK, Ignyta, IPSEN, Inivata, Janssen, Merck KGaA, MSD, Nektar, Onxeo, OSE immunotherapeutics, Pfizer, Pharma Mar, Roche-Genentech, Sanofi, Servier, Spectrum Pharmaceuticals, Takeda, Tiziana Pharma, Tolero Pharmaceuticals., outside the submitted work.

Pr Caroline Robert

CR reports personal fees for advisory boards from Bristol-Myers Squibb (BMS), Pierre Fabre, Novartis, Amgen, Merck, and Roche, outside the submitted work

Pr Fabrice Barlesi

FB reports personal fees from AstraZeneca, Bayer, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Boehringer–Ingelheim, Eli Lilly Oncology, F. Hoffmann–La Roche Ltd, Novartis, Merck, MSD, Pierre Fabre, Pfizer and Takeda, outside the submitted work.

Dr Aurélien Marabelle

AM reports sponsored Research at Gustave Roussy Cancer Center with: Abbvie, Aduro, Agios, Amgen, Argen-x, Astex, AstraZeneca, Aveo pharmaceuticals, Bayer, Beigene, Blueprint, BMS, Boeringer Ingelheim, Celgene, Chugai, Clovis, Daiichi Sankyo, Debiopharm, Eisai, Eos, Exelixis, Forma, Gamamabs, Genentech, Gortec, GSK, H3 biomedecine, Incyte, Innate Pharma, Janssen, Kura Oncology, Kyowa, Lilly, Loxo, Lysarc, Lytix Biopharma, Medimmune, Menarini, Merus, MSD, Nanobiotix, Nektar Therapeutics, Novartis, Octimet, Oncoethix, Oncopeptides AB, Orion, Pfizer, Pharmamar, Pierre Fabre, Roche, Sanofi, Servier, Sierra Oncology, Taiho, Takeda, Tesaro, Xencor, outside the submitted work.

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Figure 1. Outcome of patient with Covid-19 before and after tocilizumab. In the top of the figure, evolution of clinical vital signs, requirement for supplemental O₂ in L/min, C-reactive protein in blood. In the bottom of the figure, pulmonary CT scanner of patient before (D6) and after (D12) tocilizumab. Patient received two doses of tocilizumab intravenously at 8 mg/kg for each dose (red arrow). All therapies given for covid-19 were summarized at the top of the figure.

SpO₂: Saturation pulsed in oxygen

O₂L: Oxygen supplementation in L/min

T°: Temperature in degrees Celsius

CT: Computerized tomography

Lopinavir/r : Lopinavir plus ritonavir

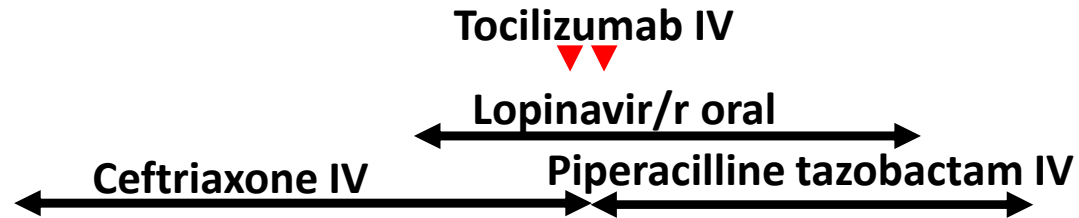
IV : Intravenously

CRP: C reactive protein in blood

Figure 2. CD25 and HLA-DR expression among CD4⁺ and CD8⁺ T cells in blood of patient with Covid-19 before and after tocilizumab. Percentage of HLA-DR (LT4 HLA-DR⁺) and CD25 (LT4 CD25⁺) among CD3⁺CD4⁺ (LT4) and of HLA-DR (LT8 HLA-DR⁺) and CD25 (LT8 CD25⁺) among CD3⁺CD8⁺ (LT8) before introduction of tocilizumab (Pre_TOCI) and 4 days after initiation of treatment (Post_TOCI).

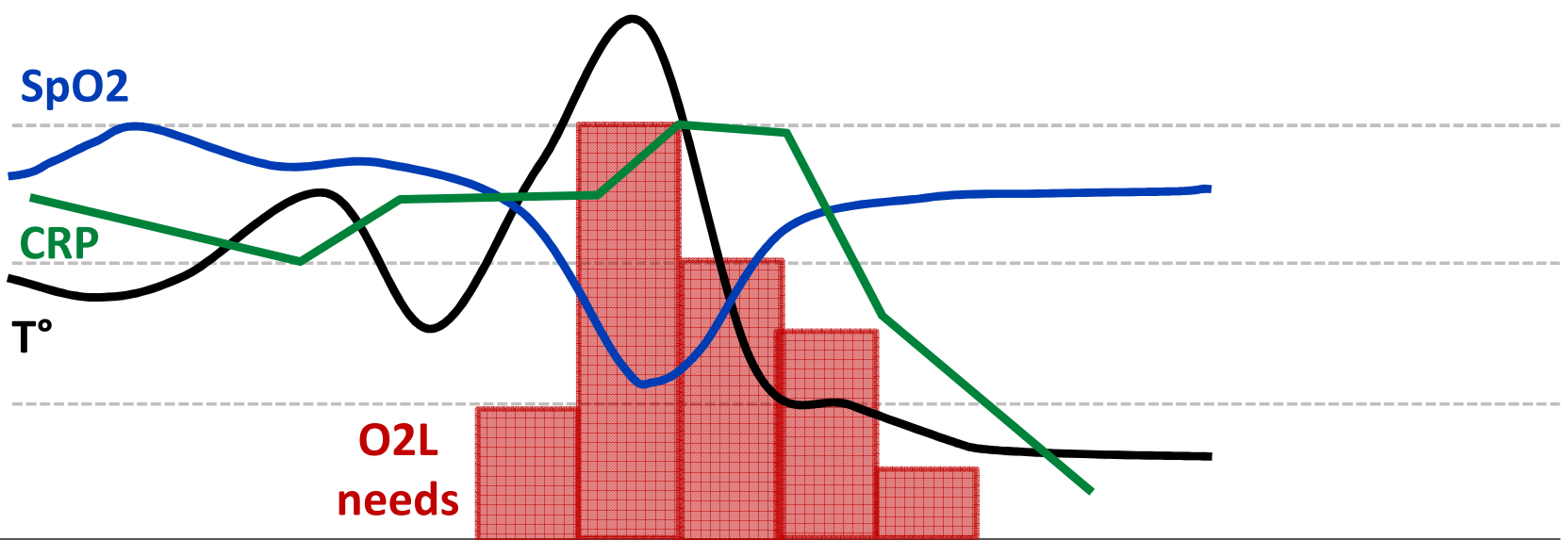
D3 D4 D5 D6 D7 D8 D9 D10 D11 D12 D13 D14 D15 D16 D17

Therapies



Main clin. and bio. features

CRP mg/L	O2L /min	SpO2 %	T° C°
225	6	95	39
150	4	90	38
75	2	85	37
0	0	80	36



CT scan

