



Impact of Initiating Biologics in Patients With Severe Asthma on Long-Term Oral Corticosteroids or Frequent Rescue Steroids (GLITTER): Data From the International Severe Asthma Registry

Wenjia Chen, PhD^a, Trung N. Tran, MD, PhD^b, Mohsen Sadatsafavi, MD, PhD^c, Ruth Murray, PhD^d, Nigel Chong Boon Wong, BSocSci (Hons)^a, Nasloon Ali, PhD^{d,e}, Con Ariti, MSc^{d,e}, Lakmini Bulathsinhala, MPH^{d,e}, Esther Garcia Gil, MD^f, J. Mark FitzGerald, MD, FRCPC^g, Marianna Alacqua, MD, PhD^h, Mona Al-Ahmad, MD, FRCPCⁱ, Alan Altraja, MD, PhD^j, Riyadh Al-Lehebi, MD, FRCPC^{k,l}, Mohit Bhutani, MD, FRCPC^m, Leif Bjermer, MD, PhDⁿ, Anne-Sofie Bjerrum, MD, PhD^o, Arnaud Bourdin, MD, PhD^p, Anna von Bülow, MD, PhD^q, John Busby, PhD^r, Giorgio Walter Canonica, MD^{s,t}, Victoria Carter, BSc^{d,e}, George C. Christoff, MD, PhD, MPH^u, Borja G. Cosio, MD, PhD^v, Richard W. Costello, MB, MD, FRCPI^w, João A. Fonseca, MD, PhD^x, Peter G. Gibson, MBBS, FRACP^{y,z}, Kwang-Ha Yoo, MD, PhD^{aa}, Liam G. Heaney, MD^{bb}, Enrico Heffler, MD, PhD^{s,t}, Mark Hew, MBBS, PhD, FRACP^{cc,dd}, Ole Hilberg, MD, DMSc^{ee}, Flavia Hoyte, MD^{ff,gg}, Takashi Iwanaga, MD, PhD^{hh}, David J. Jackson, MBBS, MRCP (UK), PhD^{ii,jj}, Rupert C. Jones, MD^{kk}, Mariko Siyue Koh, MBBS, MRCP (UK), FCCP^{ll,mm}, Piotr Kuna, MD, PhDⁿⁿ, Désirée Larenas-Linnemann, MD, FAAAAI, DistIntIFACAAI^{oo}, Sverre Lehmann, MD, PhD^{pp}, Lauri Lehtimäki, MD, PhD^{qq,rr}, Juntao Lyu, PhD^{e,ss}, Bassam Mahboub, MD^{tt,uu}, Jorge Maspero, PhD^{vv,www}, Andrew N. Menzies-Gow, PhD, FRCP^{xx}, Anthony Newell, PhD^{e,ss}, Concetta Sirena, PhD^{yy}, Nikolaos G. Papadopoulos, MD, PhD, FRCP^{zz,aaa}, Andriana I. Papaioannou, MD, PhD^{bbb}, Luis Perez-de-Llano, MD, PhD^{ccc,ddd}, Diahn-Warng Perng (Steve), MD, PhD^{eee,fff}, Matthew Peters, MD, PhD^{ggg}, Paul E. Pfeffer, MRCP (UK), PhD^{hhh,iii}, Celeste M. Porsbjerg, MD, PhD^{jjj}, Todor A. Popov, MD, PhD^{kkk}, Chin Kook Rhee, MD, PhD^{lll}, Sundeep Salvi, MD, PhD^{mmm}, Camille Taillé, MD, PhDⁿⁿⁿ, Christian Taube, MD^{ooo}, Carlos A. Torres-Duque, MD^{ppp}, Charlotte Ulrik, MD, DMSc, FERS^{qqq}, Seung-Won Ra, MD, PhD^{rrr}, Eileen Wang, MD, MPH^{ff,gg}, Michael E. Wechsler, MD^{sss}, and David B. Price, FRCGP^{d,e,ttt}

Singapore; Gaithersburg, Md; Vancouver, BC, Canada; Cambridge, London, Plymouth, Manchester, and Aberdeen, United Kingdom; Barcelona, Mallorca, Lugo, and Santiago de Compostela, Spain; Kuwait City, Kuwait; Tartu, Estonia; Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; Edmonton, AB, Canada; Lund, Sweden; Aarhus, Vejle, Copenhagen, and Hvidovre, Denmark; Montpellier and Paris, France; Belfast, Northern Ireland; Milan, Italy; Sofia, Bulgaria; Dublin, Ireland; Porto, Portugal; Newcastle, New Lambton Heights, and Sydney, NSW, Australia; Seoul and Ulsan, Korea; Melbourne, VIC, Australia; Denver and Aurora, Colo; Osakasayama and Tokyo, Japan; Łódź, Poland; Mexico City, Mexico; Bergen, Norway; Tampere, Finland; Brisbane, QLD, Australia; Sharjah and Dubai, United Arab Emirates; Buenos Aires, Argentina; Athens, Greece; Taipei, Taiwan; Pune, Maharashtra, India; Essen, Germany; and Bogotá, Colombia

What is already known about this topic? In real life, biologic use is associated with significant improvement in asthma outcomes, but its effectiveness has not been established in patients with high oral corticosteroid exposure (HOCS) or compared with continuing with HOCS alone.

What does this article add to our knowledge? Continued HOCS and switch to biologics were both associated with improvement in severe asthma outcomes. However, patients with HOCS who initiated biologics experienced even greater improvements than those who continued with long-term or frequent rescue oral corticosteroids (OCSs).

How does this study impact current management guidelines? These findings may influence guidelines to recommend biologics, even in patients showing improvement on long-term or regular rescue OCSs, as a cost-effective strategy to improve outcomes while reducing OCS exposure.

Abbreviations used

BEC- blood eosinophil count
BMI- body mass index
ED- emergency department
GINA- Global Initiative for Asthma
GLM- generalized linear model
HCRU- health care resource utilization
HOCS- high oral corticosteroid exposure
ICS- inhaled corticosteroid
ISAR- International Severe Asthma Registry
LABA- long-acting β_2 -agonist
OCS- oral corticosteroid
RCT- randomized controlled trial
T2- type 2

BACKGROUND: Effectiveness of biologics has neither been established in patients with high oral corticosteroid exposure (HOCS) nor been compared with effectiveness of continuing with HOCS alone.

OBJECTIVE: To examine the effectiveness of initiating biologics in a large, real-world cohort of adult patients with severe asthma and HOCS.

METHODS: This was a propensity score–matched, prospective cohort study using data from the International Severe Asthma Registry. Between January 2015 and February 2021, patients with severe asthma and HOCS (long-term OCSs for ≥ 1 year or ≥ 4 courses of rescue OCSs within a 12-month period) were identified. Biologic initiators were identified and, using propensity scores, matched 1:1 with noninitiators. The impact of biologic initiation on asthma outcomes was assessed using generalized linear models.

RESULTS: We identified 996 matched pairs of patients. Both groups improved over the 12-month follow-up period, but improvement was greater for biologic initiators. Biologic initiation was associated with a 72.9% reduction in the average number of exacerbations per year versus noninitiators (0.64 vs 2.06; rate ratio, 0.27 [95% CI, 0.10-0.71]). Biologic initiators were 2.2 times more likely than noninitiators to take a daily long-term OCS dose of less than 5 mg (risk probability, 49.6% vs 22.5%; $P = .002$) and had a lower risk of asthma-related emergency department visits (relative risk, 0.35 [95% CI, 0.21-0.58]; rate ratio, 0.26 [0.14-0.48]) and hospitalizations (relative risk, 0.31 [95% CI, 0.18-0.52]; rate ratio, 0.25 [0.13-0.48]).

CONCLUSIONS: In a real-world setting, including patients with severe asthma and HOCS from 19 countries, and within an

^aSaw Swee Hock School of Public Health, National University of Singapore, Singapore

^bAstraZeneca, Gaithersburg, Md

^cRespiratory Evaluation Sciences Program, Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

^dOptimum Patient Care Global, Cambridge, United Kingdom

^eObservational and Pragmatic Research Institute, Singapore

^fAstraZeneca, Barcelona, Spain

^gDepartment of Medicine, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

^hAstraZeneca, Cambridge, United Kingdom

ⁱMicrobiology Department, Faculty of Medicine, Kuwait University, Al-Rashed Allergy Center, Ministry of Health, Kuwait City, Kuwait

^jDepartment of Pulmonology, University of Tartu and Lung Clinic, Tartu University Hospital, Tartu, Estonia

^kDepartment of Pulmonology, King Fahad Medical City, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

^lCollege of Medicine, Alfaisal University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

^mDivision of Pulmonary Medicine, Department of Medicine, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

ⁿRespiratory Medicine and Allergology, Department of Clinical Sciences, Skåne University Hospital, Lund University, Lund, Sweden

^oDepartment of Respiratory Medicine and Allergy, Aarhus University Hospital, Aarhus, Denmark

^pPhyMedExp, Univ Montpellier, CNRS, INSERM, CHU Montpellier, Montpellier, France

^qRespiratory Research Unit, Bispebjerg University Hospital, Copenhagen, Denmark

^rCentre for Public Health, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, Northern Ireland

^sPersonalized Medicine, Asthma and Allergy, Humanitas Clinical and Research Center IRCCS, Rozzano, Milan, Italy

^tDepartment of Biomedical Sciences, Humanitas University, Pieve Emanuele, Milan, Italy

^uFaculty of Public Health, Medical University-Sofia, Sofia, Bulgaria

^vSon Espases University Hospital-IdISBa-Ciberes, Mallorca, Spain

^wDepartment of Respiratory Medicine, RCSI Clinical Research Centre, Smurfit Building Beaumont Hospital, Dublin, Ireland

^xHealth Information and Decision Sciences Department (MEDCIDS) & Center for Health Technology and Services Research (CINTESIS), Faculty of Medicine of University of Porto, Porto, Portugal

^yAustralian Severe Asthma Network, Priority Research Centre for Healthy Lungs, University of Newcastle, Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia

^zDepartment of Respiratory and Sleep Medicine, Hunter Medical Research Institute, John Hunter Hospital, New Lambton Heights, New South Wales, Australia

^{aa}KonKuk University School of Medicine, Seoul, Korea

^{bb}Wellcome-Wolfson Centre for Experimental Medicine, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, Northern Ireland

^{cc}Allergy, Asthma & Clinical Immunology Service, Alfred Health, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

^{dd}Public Health and Preventive Medicine, Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

^{ee}Medical Department, Vejle University Hospital, Vejle, Denmark

^{ff}Division of Allergy & Clinical Immunology, Department of Medicine, National Jewish Health, Denver, Colo

^{gg}Division of Allergy & Clinical Immunology, Department of Medicine, University of Colorado School of Medicine, Aurora, Colo

^{hh}Center for General Medical Education and Clinical Training, Kindai University Hospital, Osakasayama, Japan

ⁱⁱUK Severe Asthma Network and National Registry, Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Trust, London, United Kingdom

^{jj}School of Immunology & Microbial Sciences, King's College London, London, United Kingdom

^{kk}Research and Knowledge Exchange, Plymouth Marjon University, Plymouth, United Kingdom

^{ll}Respiratory & Critical Care Medicine, Singapore General Hospital, Singapore

^{mm}SingHealth Duke-NUS Lung Centre, Singapore

ⁿⁿDivision of Internal Medicine, Asthma and Allergy Medical University of Łódź, Łódź, Poland

^{oo}Centro de Excelencia en Asma y Alergia, Hospital Médica Sur, Mexico City, Mexico

^{pp}Section of Thoracic Medicine, Department of Clinical Science, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway

^{qq}Allergy Centre, Tampere University Hospital, Tampere, Finland

^{rr}Faculty of Medicine and Health Technology, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

^{ss}Optimum Patient Care, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

^{tt}College of Medicine, University of Sharjah, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

^{uu}Rashid Hospital, Dubai Health Authority, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

^{vv}Clinical Research for Allergy and Respiratory Medicine, CIDEA Foundation, Buenos Aires, Argentina

^{ww}University Career of Specialists in Allergy and Clinical Immunology at the Buenos Aires University School of Medicine, Buenos Aires, Argentina

^{xx}Royal Brompton & Harefield Hospitals, London, United Kingdom

^{yy}Severe Asthma Network in Italy (SANI), Milan, Italy

^{zz}Division of Infection, Immunity & Respiratory Medicine, University of Manchester, Manchester, United Kingdom

^{aaa}Allergy Department, 2nd Pediatric Clinic, University of Athens, Athens, Greece

^{bbb}2nd Respiratory Medicine Department, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens Medical School, Attikon University Hospital, Athens, Greece

environment of clinical improvement, initiation of biologics was associated with further improvements across multiple asthma outcomes, including exacerbation rate, OCS exposure, and health care resource utilization. © 2023 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Inc. on behalf of the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). (J Allergy Clin Immunol Pract 2023;11:2732-47)

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INTRODUCTION

Severe asthma refers to asthma that is uncontrolled despite high-dose inhaled corticosteroids (ICSs)/long-acting β_2 -agonists (LABAs) or that requires high-dose ICSs/LABAs to remain controlled.¹ It is thought to affect up to 10% of the total asthma population² and is associated with significant morbidity, mortality, and socioeconomic burden.^{3,4} Recent global characterization analyses showed the high treatment burden associated with severe asthma (more than one-third of patients with severe asthma were on Global Initiative for Asthma [GINA] step 5 treatment, and more than half received intermittent oral corticosteroid [OCS] bursts⁵) and the predominance of the eosinophilic phenotype.⁶ Despite this high treatment burden, it has been reported that more than half of these patients had poorly controlled disease and experienced more than 1 exacerbation per year on average.⁵ As a consequence, health care costs in severe asthma are disproportionately high, with direct costs higher than

for type 2 (T2) diabetes, stroke, or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease⁷ and total costs accounting for more than 60% of total asthma expenditure.⁸

ICSs represent the cornerstone of asthma treatment.¹ However, there are 2 major limitations associated with their use: (1) local and systemic side effects, which are more common at higher doses, and (2) the persistence of exacerbations and poor control seen in some patients, predominantly among those with severe disease.^{9,10} For example, a survey in the United Kingdom found that 64% of patients with asthma taking ICSs reported 1 or more side effect.¹¹ GINA recommends short-course OCSs for those on medium-dose maintenance ICS/formoterol (step 4) whose initial presentation is with severely uncontrolled asthma or with an acute exacerbation.¹ Low-dose maintenance OCS is also an option that may be added at step 5 to high-dose ICS/LABA to control symptoms and minimize future exacerbation risk.¹ However, the cumulative burden of OCSs, from short-course and maintenance doses, is associated with adverse effects including obesity, diabetes, osteoporosis, cataract, hypertension, and adrenal suppression as well as psychological side effects such as depression and anxiety.¹² Indeed, even short-term OCS use is associated with sleep disturbance and increased risk of infection, fracture, and thromboembolism.¹³ Strategies to minimize need for OCSs are, therefore, a high priority.¹ According to OCS stewardship statements supported by the American College of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology and the American Lung Foundation (among others),¹⁴ “it is time to protect patients with asthma from potential over-exposure to OCS and to recognize OCS overuse for what it often is: a treatment plan failure.”¹⁴

Biologics (including anti-IgE, anti-IL-5/5R, anti-IL-4R α , and anti-thymic stromal lymphopoietin) that target key

^{ccc}Pneumology Service, Lucus Augusti University Hospital, EOXI Lugo, Monforte, Cervo, Lugo, Spain

^{ddd}Biodiscovery Research Group, Health Research Institute of Santiago de Compostela, Santiago de Compostela, Spain

^{eee}Division of Clinical Respiratory Physiology, Chest Department, Taipei Veterans General Hospital, Taipei, Taiwan

^{fff}COPD Assembly of the Asian Pacific Society of Respiratory, Tokyo, Japan

^{ggg}Department of Thoracic Medicine, Concord Hospital, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

^{hhh}Department of Respiratory Medicine, Barts Health NHS Trust, London, United Kingdom

ⁱⁱⁱBarts and The London School of Medicine and Dentistry, Queen Mary University of London, London, United Kingdom

^{jjj}Respiratory Research Unit, Bispebjerg University Hospital, Copenhagen, Denmark

^{kkk}University Hospital “Sv. Ivan Rilski,” Sofia, Bulgaria

^{lll}Division of Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine, Department of Internal Medicine, Seoul St Mary’s Hospital, College of Medicine, The Catholic University of Korea, Seoul, Korea

^{mmmm}Pulmocare Research and Education Foundation, Pune, Maharashtra, India

ⁿⁿⁿDepartment of Respiratory Diseases, Bichat Hospital, AP-HP Nord-Université de Paris, Paris, France

^{ooo}Department of Pulmonary Medicine, University Medical Center Essen-Ruhrlandklinik, Essen, Germany

^{ppp}CINEUMO, Respiratory Research Center, Fundación Neumológica Colombiana, Bogotá, Colombia

^{qqq}Department of Respiratory Medicine, Copenhagen University Hospital-Hvidovre, Hvidovre, Denmark

^{rrr}Division of Pulmonology, Department of Internal Medicine, Ulsan University Hospital, University of Ulsan College of Medicine, Ulsan, Korea

^{sss}NJH Cohen Family Asthma Institute, Department of Medicine, National Jewish Health, Denver, Colo

^{ttt}Division of Applied Health Sciences, Centre of Academic Primary Care, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, United Kingdom

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mediators of the T2 inflammatory cascade can be effective to achieve that aim. They are recommended for patients with severe asthma with exacerbations or poor symptom control on high-dose ICSs/LABAs, who have increased levels of T2 biomarkers (eg, high blood eosinophil count [BEC]) or need maintenance OCS.¹ Their efficacy and safety are well established within the randomized controlled trial (RCT) setting.¹⁵ A systematic review comparing the 5 current biologics to standard of care for severe eosinophilic asthma found that there is high certainty that all approved biologics reduce the rate of severe asthma exacerbations and that benralizumab, dupilumab, and mepolizumab reduce OCS use.¹⁵ However, these confirmatory efficacy studies are limited by restrictive eligibility criteria, relatively small patient populations, and varying study methodologies. As such, the generalizability of individual study results to the broader asthma population is limited.¹⁶

In real life, biologic use has been associated with a significant improvement in lung function and asthma control as well as a reduction in the number of asthma exacerbations and OCS use.¹⁷⁻²⁰ However, most real-life studies have been small, have used different definitions of severe asthma and asthma

exacerbations, and have included patients receiving widely varying OCS doses at baseline. Effectiveness of biologics has neither been established in patients with high OCS exposure (HOCS) nor been compared with the effectiveness of continuing with HOCS alone and not initiating biologic therapy.¹⁶

Our aim was to examine the effectiveness of initiating biologics in a large, real-world cohort of adult patients with severe asthma and HOCS.

METHODS

Study design and data source

This was a propensity score–matched, prospective cohort study using data from the International Severe Asthma Registry (ISAR); <https://isaregistries.org/>). Registry details have been described elsewhere.²¹ We included data from 19 countries (Argentina, Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, Colombia, Denmark, Greece, India, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Kuwait, Mexico, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Taiwan, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom) that shared data with ISAR between January 2015 and February 2021. The study was designed, implemented, and reported in compliance with

has received lecture fees from AZ, GSK, and Novartis. A. Bourdin has received industry-sponsored grants from AZ-MedImmune, BI, Cephalon/Teva Pharmaceuticals, GSK, Novartis, and Sanofi Regeneron; and had consultancy agreements with AZ-MedImmune, BI, GSK, Novartis, Sanofi Regeneron, Med-in-Cell, Actelion, Merck, Roche, and Chiesi. A. von Bülow reports speaker fees and consultancy fees from AZ, GSK, and Novartis, outside the submitted work; and has also attended the advisory board for Novartis and AZ. G. W. Canonica has received research grants as well as lecture or advisory board fees from A. Menarini, ALK-Abelló, Allergy Therapeutics, Anallergo, AZ, MedImmune, BI, Chiesi, Circassia, Danone, Faes, Genentech, Guidotti Malesci, GSK, Hal Allergy, Merck, MSD, Mundipharma, Novartis, Orion, Sanofi Aventis, Sanofi, Genzyme/Regeneron Pharmaceuticals, Stallergenes, UCB Pharma, Uriach Pharma, Teva Pharmaceuticals, Thermo Fisher, and Valeas. V. Carter is an employee of OPC, which is a cofunder of the ISAR. B. G. Cosio declares grants from Chiesi and GSK; personal fees for advisory board activities from Chiesi, GSK, Novartis, Sanofi, Teva Pharmaceuticals, and AZ; and payment for lectures/speaking engagements from Chiesi, Novartis, GSK, Menarini, and AZ, outside the submitted work. R. W. Costello has received honoraria for lectures from Aerogen, AZ, BI, GSK, Novartis, and Teva Pharmaceuticals; is a member of advisory boards for GSK and Novartis; has received grant support from GSK and Aerogen; and has patents in the use of acoustics in the diagnosis of lung disease, assessment of adherence, and prediction of exacerbations. J. A. Fonseca reports grants from or research agreements with AZ, Mundipharma, Sanofi Regeneron, and Novartis; and personal fees for lectures and attending advisory boards for AZ, GSK, Mundipharma, Novartis, Sanofi Regeneron, and Teva Pharmaceuticals. P. G. Gibson has received speaker fees and grants to his institution from AZ, GSK, and Novartis. L. G. Heaney has received grant funding, participated in advisory boards, and given lectures at meetings supported by Amgen, AZ, BI, Circassia, Hoffmann la Roche, GSK, Novartis, Theravance, Evelo Biosciences, Sanofi, and Teva Pharmaceuticals; has received grants from MedImmune, Novartis UK, Roche/Genentech, GSK, Amgen, Genentech/Hoffmann la Roche, AZ, Aerocrine, and Vitalograph; has received sponsorship for attending international scientific meetings from AZ, BI, Chiesi, GSK, and Napp Pharmaceuticals; has also taken part in asthma clinical trials sponsored by BI, Hoffmann la Roche, and GSK for which his institution received remuneration; is the Academic Lead for the Medical Research Council Stratified Medicine UK Consortium in Severe Asthma, which involves industrial partnerships with a number of pharmaceutical companies including Amgen, AZ, BI, GSK, Hoffmann la Roche, and Janssen. E. Heffler participates in speaking activities and industry advisory committees for AZ, Sanofi Genzyme, GSK, Novartis, Teva Pharmaceuticals, Circassia, and Nestlé Purina. M. Hew declares grants and other advisory board fees (made to his institutional employer) from AZ, GSK, Novartis, Sanofi, Teva Pharmaceuticals, and Seqirus, for unrelated projects. O. Hilberg declares lecture and advisory board fees from GSK, AZ, BI, Teva Pharmaceuticals, Chiesi,

Novartis, MSD, and Sanofi. F. Hoyte declares honoraria from AZ; has been an investigator on clinical trials sponsored by GSK, Genentech, Teva Pharmaceuticals, Sanofi, and the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, for which her institution has received funding. T. Iwanaga declares grants from Astellas, BI, Daiichi Sankyo, Kyorin, MeijiSeika Pharma, Teijin Pharma, Ono, and Taiho; and lecture fees from Kyorin, GSK, Sanofi, and AZ. D. J. Jackson has received advisory board and speaker fees from AZ, GSK, BI, Teva Pharmaceuticals, Napp Pharmaceuticals, Chiesi, and Novartis; and research grant funding from AZ. R. C. Jones declares grants from AZ, GSK, Novartis, and Teva Pharmaceuticals; and personal fees for consultancy, speaker fees, or travel support from AZ, BI, GSK, Novartis, and OPRI. M. S. Koh reports grant support from AZ; and honoraria for lectures and advisory board meetings paid to her hospital (Singapore General Hospital) from GSK, AZ, Sanofi, and BI, outside the submitted work. P. Kuna reports personal fees from Adamed, AZ, Berlin-Chemie Menarini, BI, Lekam, Novartis, Chiesi, Polpharma, Sanofi, Teva Pharmaceuticals, and Zentiva, outside the submitted work. D. L. Linnemann reports speaker or personal fees from ALK-Abelló, Alakos, Armstrong, AZ, BI, Chiesi, DBV Technologies, Gossamer, Grunenthal, GSK, Menarini, MSD, Novartis, Pfizer, Purina Institute, Sanofi, Siegfried, UCB, and Viatrix; and grants from Sanofi, AbbVie, ALK-Abelló, AZ, Chiesi, GSK, Lilly, Novartis, Pfizer, and UCB, outside the submitted work. S. Lehmann declares receipt of lecture (personal) and advisory board (to employer) fees from AZ, BI, and Novartis; and has participated in research with AZ and GSK for which his institution has been remunerated. L. Lehtimäki declares personal fees for consultancy, lectures, and attending advisory boards from ALK-Abelló, AZ, BI, Circassia, Chiesi, GSK, Menarini, Mundipharma, Novartis, Orion Pharma, Sanofi, and Teva Pharmaceuticals. J. Lyu is an employee of OPC. J. Maspero reports personal fees from AZ, Novartis, GSK, and IMMUNOTEK; grants and personal fees from Sanofi; and personal fees from BI, outside the submitted work. A. N. Menzies-Gow has attended advisory boards for AZ, GSK, Novartis, Regeneron Pharmaceuticals, Sanofi, and Teva Pharmaceuticals; has received speaker fees from AZ, Novartis, Teva Pharmaceuticals, and Sanofi; has participated in research with AZ for which his institution has been remunerated; has attended international conferences with Teva Pharmaceuticals; and has had consultancy agreements with AZ and Sanofi. A. Newell was an employee of OPC at the time this research was conducted. N. G. Papadopoulos declares research support from Gerolymatos, Menarini, Nutricia, and Vian; and reports consultancy/speaker fees from ASIT, AZ, BI, GSK, HAL Allergy, Medscape, Menarini, MSD, Mylan, Novartis, Nutricia, OM Pharma, Sanofi, and Takeda. A. I. Papaioannou has received fees and honoraria from Menarini, GSK, Novartis, Elpen, BI, AZ, and Chiesi. L. Perez-de-Llano declares nonfinancial support, personal fees, and grants from Teva Pharmaceuticals; nonfinancial support and personal fees from BI, Esteve, GSK, Mundipharma, and Novartis; personal fees and grants from AZ and Chiesi; personal fees from Sanofi; and nonfinancial support from Menarini, outside

the European Network Centres for Pharmacoepidemiology and Pharmacovigilance Code of Conduct (European Medicine Agency 2014; European Union Electronic Register of Post-Authorisation Studies 33582) and with all applicable local and international laws and regulations. The ISAR database has ethical approval from the Anonymized Data Ethics Protocols and Transparency Committee (ADEPT0218).

Patients

Patients were required to be 18 years and older at enrollment and have severe asthma (ie, receiving treatment at GINA 2018 step 5 or with uncontrolled asthma at GINA step 4).²² See Table E1 in this article's Online Repository at www.jaci-inpractice.org for individual registry diagnostic and severe asthma criteria. Biologic prescription criteria variability between ISAR participating countries has been published elsewhere.²³ Patients were also required to have a history of HOCS defined as long-term use of OCSs for at least 1 year or 4 or more courses of rescue steroid bursts during the 12-month baseline period. The latter was agreed *a priori* and in line with previous publications.²⁴ Patients with HOCS were divided into the biologic-initiated group (who received biologics [anti-IgE, anti-IL-5/5R, and anti-IL-4R α]) and the biologic-not-initiated group (who were never administered a biologic). Effectiveness was assessed from the date of biologic initiation in the biologic-initiated group (which for some patients was before the first ISAR visit) and from the date of study entry for the biologic-not-initiated group. Various demographic and clinical variables of interest were retrieved on this date (eg, age, sex, ethnicity, and smoking status). An intention-to-treat approach was

applied, in which patients remained in the groups to which they were originally assigned, regardless of any potential changes in treatment (eg, stopped HOCS) over time. Previously, we found that only 10% of ISAR patients who initiated biologics stopped treatment.²⁵ Patients with a history of bronchial thermoplasty, with previous history of biologic use, or with inadequate background data on the date of initiation were excluded.

Propensity score matching

Propensity score matching was required because patients with severe asthma and HOCS who initiated biologics have different clinical characteristics than those who do not. These data have been published in detail elsewhere.²⁶ It was performed to obtain unbiased effectiveness estimates by comparing patients with severe asthma and HOCS who initiated biologics with those with similar clinical characteristics but who did not initiate biologics. Missing data were imputed using a robust multiple imputation approach before matching. Propensity score was derived using logistic regression, with initiation of biologics as the dependent variable. Covariates included age, sex, ethnicity, age at asthma onset, body mass index (BMI), BEC, smoking status, use of invasive ventilation, positive allergen test result, allergic rhinitis, chronic rhinosinusitis, eczema, nasal polyps, atopic condition, and geographical locations; all these covariates were measured at baseline, defined as within the past 12 months of biologic initiation or study entry for the biologic-initiated and the biologic-not-initiated groups, respectively. Of note, following expert recommendation, outcome history covariates were excluded in the matching to ensure objectivity of the study design.²⁷

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Corresponding author: David B. Price, FRCGP, Observational and Pragmatic Research Institute, 22 Sin Ming Lane, No. 06 Midview City, Singapore 573969.

E-mail: dprice@opri.sg.

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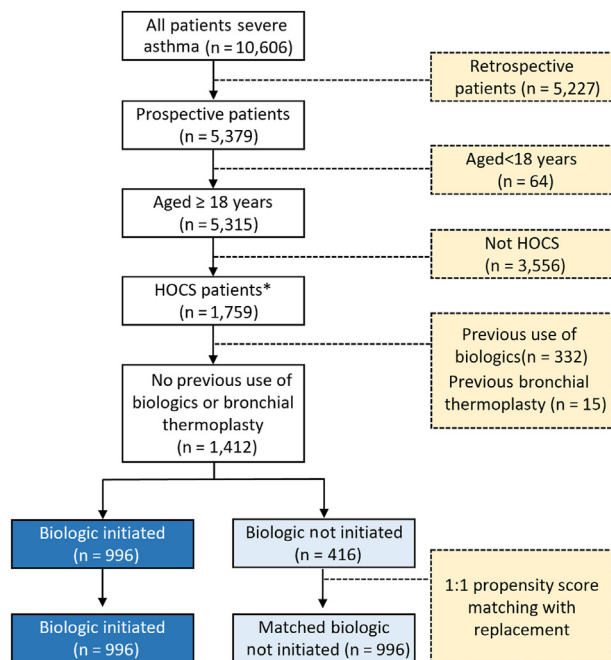


FIGURE 1. Subject disposition. *Long-term use of OCSs for at least 1 year or 4 or more courses of rescue steroid bursts during the 12-month baseline (preindex) period.

A 1:1 nearest neighbor matching with replacement and subsequent regression analyses was then performed, such that the nonbiologic patients could be matched to 1 or more biologic users (see the Online Repository at www.jaci-inpractice.org).

Outcome variables

The primary outcome was reduced rate of asthma exacerbations with initiation of a biologic therapy, compared with noninitiation. The secondary outcomes included improvement in asthma control, reduction in OCS dose, and reduced number of asthma-related emergency department (ED) visits and asthma-related hospital admissions. The exploratory outcome included reduced risk of OCS-related comorbidities. All outcomes were estimated during a 365-day follow-up period. Definitions and longitudinal measurements are provided in [Table E2](http://www.jaci-inpractice.org) in this article’s Online Repository at www.jaci-inpractice.org.

Statistical analyses

The statistical analysis plan was predefined, and analyses were performed using Stata version 17 (StataCorp, College Station, Tex). Continuous and categorical data were described as mean ± SD and n (%), respectively. Overall, we used generalized linear models (GLMs; with the choice of the distribution and link function depending on the nature of the dependent variable) with generalized estimating equations to obtain robust inference by accounting for clustering (matched pairs and time-series measurements of specific outcomes). All regression analyses were adjusted for the follow-up period (ie, follow-up days were included either as a covariate in the linear and logistic regressions or as an off-set variable in the Poisson and negative binomial regressions, for the specific type of outcomes). The impact of biologic initiation on outcomes was estimated as marginal effects during the first 365 days of follow-up.

Outcomes were not reported for all patients because our study included 9 longitudinal outcomes with different data types (eg, censored count and binary data, and time-series multinomial data), which were measured at irregularly repeated real-world clinic visits over time. To prevent uncertainty in assumption and potential bias associated with the use of complex imputation methods, we did not impute missing outcome data. The missing pattern of outcome data and the number of observations included in each outcome are provided in [Table E3](http://www.jaci-inpractice.org) in this article’s Online Repository at www.jaci-inpractice.org. Additional details are provided in the Online Repository.

Primary analysis

A GLM with negative binomial distribution was used to estimate change in rate of exacerbations due to biologic initiation. Using a special causal inference technique (ie, G-computation), covariate-adjusted effects of biologic initiation were estimated overall and according to age category, sex group, smoking status, BMI category, and eosinophilic phenotype (see [Figure E1](http://www.jaci-inpractice.org) in this article’s Online Repository at www.jaci-inpractice.org), with further adjustments for exacerbation history and variables whose distribution was still unbalanced (defined as standardized difference >0.25 after matching)²⁸ (ie, smoking status and ethnicity).

Secondary analyses

A GLM with multinomial distribution was used to estimate the change in OCS dose due to biologic initiation. OCS dose was categorized in 2 ways: (1) total cumulative OCS dose per day during follow-up, which included maintenance and burst dose, and (2) long-term cumulative OCS dose per day, which included maintenance dose only. Both total and long-term daily cumulative OCS dose reduction from baseline to follow-up were categorized as increased dose (<0% reduction), low dose reduction (0% to ≤50%), moderate dose reduction (>50% to ≤75%), and optimal dose reduction (>75%). An additional logistic regression was used to assess the likelihood of achieving low OCS use, with an OCS dose of less than 5 mg used to define both low total dose and low long-term dose. Independent variables were the same as the main OCS model. A GLM with multinomial distribution was used to assess change in asthma control. Health care resource utilization (HCRU) was assessed using a 2-part GLM separately for asthma-related ED visits and asthma-related hospitalizations. The first part was a probit model to estimate the probability of having any outcome event during follow-up, and the second part involved a negative binomial model to estimate the number of outcome events for those who had at least 1 event. An exploratory logistic regression was used to assess the incidence of any OCS-related comorbidities and any OCS-related chronic comorbidities (median follow-up period 721 days; interquartile range, 366-1182 days). All secondary analysis regressions were adjusted for unbalanced propensity score variables, exacerbation history, and the history of the corresponding secondary outcome.

Ethics Approval

This study was designed, implemented, and reported in compliance with the European Network Centres for Pharmacoepidemiology and Pharmacovigilance Code of Conduct (European Medicine Agency 2014; European Union Electronic Register of Post-Authorisation Studies 33582) and with all applicable local and international laws and regulations. Registration of the International Severe Asthma Registry (ISAR) database with the European Union Electronic Register of Post-Authorisation Studies was also

TABLE I. Postmatching baseline characteristics of propensity scoring variables

Characteristics	Biologic initiated (n = 996)	Biologic not initiated (n = 996)	SMD
Age (y), mean ± SD	51.7 ± 13.9	51.1 ± 14.6	-0.04
Sex, n (%)			
Male	387 (38.9)	296 (29.7)	0.19
Female	609 (61.1)	700 (70.3)	
Ethnicity, n (%)			
White	689 (69.2)	682 (68.5)	
Asian	62 (6.2)	65 (6.5)	
African	36 (3.6)	42 (4.2)	0.34*
Mixed	17 (1.7)	55 (5.5)	
Other	83 (8.3)	108 (10.8)	
Unknown	109 (10.9)	46 (4.6)	
Age of asthma onset (y), mean ± SD	28.4 ± 18.7	28.2 ± 18.8	-0.01
BMI (kg/m ²), mean ± SD	29.3 ± 6.8	28.5 ± 7.4	-0.11
BEC (n/mL), mean ± SD	479.8 ± 469.7	527.4 ± 471.3	0.10
Smoking status, n (%)			
Current smoker	25 (2.5)	70 (7.0)	
Ex-smoker	285 (28.6)	210 (21.1)	0.27*
Nonsmoker	686 (68.9)	716 (71.9)	
Invasive ventilation, n (%)	69 (6.9)	138 (13.9)	0.23
Positive allergen test result, n (%)	618 (62.0)	623 (62.6)	0.04
Allergic rhinitis, n (%)	313 (31.4)	302 (30.3)	0.08
Chronic rhinosinusitis, n (%)	246 (24.7)	167 (16.8)	0.20
Eczema, n (%)	98 (9.8)	61 (6.1)	0.14
Nasal polyps, n (%)	351 (35.2)	266 (26.7)	0.19
Atopic sensitization, n (%)	819 (82.2)	866 (86.9)	0.13
Country, n (%)			
Argentina	1 (0.1)	1 (0.1)	
Australia	43 (4.3)	43 (4.3)	
Bulgaria	4 (0.4)	3 (0.3)	
Canada	23 (2.3)	26 (2.6)	
Colombia	1 (0.1)	1 (0.1)	0.22
Denmark	170 (17.1)	124 (12.4)	
Greece	10 (1.0)	9 (0.9)	
India	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	
Ireland	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	
Italy	136 (13.7)	132 (13.3)	
Japan	6 (0.6)	8 (0.8)	
Kuwait	70 (7.0)	73 (7.3)	
Mexico	9 (0.9)	3 (0.3)	
Saudi Arabia	15 (1.5)	18 (1.8)	
South Korea	2 (0.2)	1 (0.1)	
Spain	7 (0.7)	7 (0.7)	
Taiwan	4 (0.4)	3 (0.3)	
United Arab Emirates	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	
United Kingdom	495 (49.7)	547 (54.9)	

SMD, Standardized mean difference.

*Following guideline recommendation, a standardized difference ranging 0.1 or 0.25 represents acceptable standardized biases. Covariates with a standardized difference of >0.25 were adjusted in the regression analyses.

undertaken (ENCEPP/DSPP/23720). ISAR has ethical approval from the Anonymized Data Ethics Protocols and Transparency Committee (ADEPT0218). Governance was provided by the Anonymized Data Ethics Protocols and Transparency Committee

(registration no. ADEPT0420). All data collection sites in the ISAR have obtained regulatory agreement in compliance with specific data transfer laws, country-specific legislations, and relevant ethical boards and organizations.

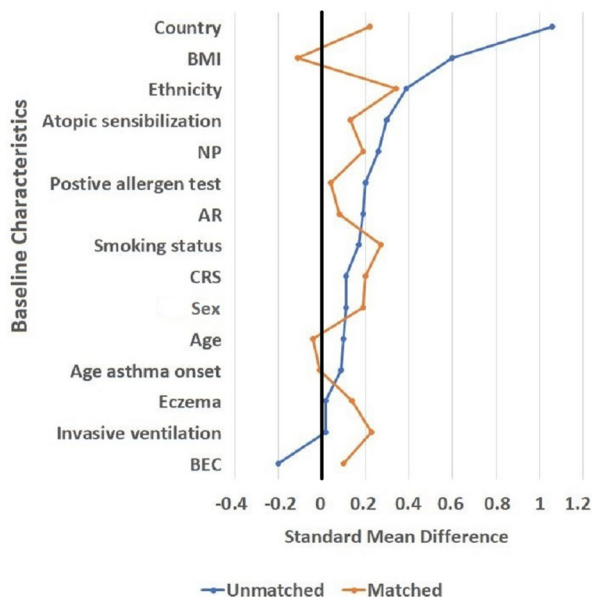


FIGURE 2. Comparison of pre- and post-propensity score matching baseline characteristics. The matched cohort included data on 996 patients who initiated biologics and 996 patients who did not. These patients were matched for baseline characteristics shown on the y-axis. Patients were not matched by baseline characteristics in the unmatched cohort, which comprised 996 patients who initiated biologics and 416 who did not. *AR*, Allergic rhinitis; *CRS*, chronic rhinosinusitis; *NP*, nasal polyp.

Data Availability

In line with ISAR governance restrictions, sharing individual deidentified participant data is subject to the consent of the ISAR Steering Committee members in accordance with patient consent, patient confidentiality, and ethical considerations. The study documents (protocol, statistical analysis plan, clinical study report) will be made available in accordance with the criteria of the European Network of Centres for Pharmacoepidemiology and Pharmacovigilance (European Union Electronic Register of Post-Authorisation Studies 38128). Proposals should be directed to info@isaregistries.org; to gain access, if approved by the regulatory boards, data requestors will need to sign a data access agreement.

RESULTS

Patients

Between January 2015 and February 2021, of the 10,606 adult patients with severe asthma from 19 ISAR participating countries, there were 5379 prospectively recruited patients, of whom 1412 had HOCS during the baseline period and met the inclusion criteria. The median follow-up period was 597 days, with an interquartile range of 360 to 964 days. Among these patients, 996 (70.5%) initiated biologics and 416 (29.5%) did not (Figure 1). All those who initiated a biologic were kept and matched with those who did not initiate a biologic (with replacement), yielding 996 patients per group (Figure 1). Of those who initiated a biologic, most ($n = 604$; 62.7%) were prescribed mepolizumab, followed by omalizumab ($n = 260$; 27.0%). Relatively small proportions of patients initiated

TABLE II. Postmatching baseline clinical characteristics

Characteristics	Biologic initiated (n = 996)	Biologic not initiated (n = 996)	SMD
No. of asthma exacerbations in the past year, mean \pm SD	5.1 \pm 4.1	5.0 \pm 3.8	-0.02
Long-term OCSs, n (%)	612 (61.4)	508 (51.0)	0.21
Total daily OCS dose (mg)			
Mean \pm SD	16.11 \pm 15.69	12.45 (7.31)	-0.299
Interquartile range	6.64-16.58	8.29-21.10	
Long-term daily OCS dose (mg)			
Mean \pm SD	12.72 \pm 8.92	9.99 \pm 6.21	-0.356
Interquartile range	5.00-12.50	5.00-20.00	
Asthma control, n (%) [*]			
Well controlled	51 (6.0)	35 (4.1)	0.12
Partially controlled	98 (11.6)	98 (11.6)	
Not controlled	628 (74.2)	713 (84.3)	
ED visits, mean \pm SD	1.7 \pm 4.3	1.8 \pm 3.7	0.02
Hospital admissions, mean \pm SD	0.9 \pm 2.0	0.9 \pm 1.6	0.00
ICS adherence, n (%)			
Adherent	774 (88.7)	603.5 (69.7)	0.50
Poor: clinical impression	12 (1.4)	74.8 (8.6)	
Poor: prescription records	87 (10.0)	187.5 (21.7)	

SMD, Standardized mean difference.

^{*}Assessed by GINA asthma control criteria,¹ Asthma Control Questionnaire,²⁹ or Asthma Control Test.³⁰

benralizumab ($n = 82$; 8.5%), reslizumab ($n = 12$; 1.2%), and dupilumab ($n = 6$; 0.6%).

Baseline characteristics: Propensity matching

After propensity score matching, biologic-initiated and biologic-not-initiated cohorts were well balanced for age, sex, ethnicity, age of asthma onset, BMI, BEC, smoking status, history of invasive ventilations, testing positive for allergen tests (either skin prick test to aeroallergens or serum specific IgE to aeroallergens), atopic sensitization (being recorded as atopic), the incidence of relevant comorbidities, and country (Table I; Figure 2).

The pre- and postmatching baseline characteristics are provided in Table E4 in this article's Online Repository at www.jaci-inpractice.org, and the propensity score distribution is displayed in Figure E2 in this article's Online Repository at www.jaci-inpractice.org. Of note, although eosinophilic gradient phenotype was not a propensity scoring variable, most matched patients from both the biologic-initiated and the biologic-not-initiated groups were in ISAR eosinophilic grade 3: most likely eosinophilic (89% and 75%, respectively) (Table E4). Patients were also well matched for asthma exacerbation rate, long-term and total OCS dose, asthma control, and HCRU (Table II). See Figure E3 in this article's Online Repository at www.jaci-inpractice.org for prevalence of OCS-related comorbidities per group.

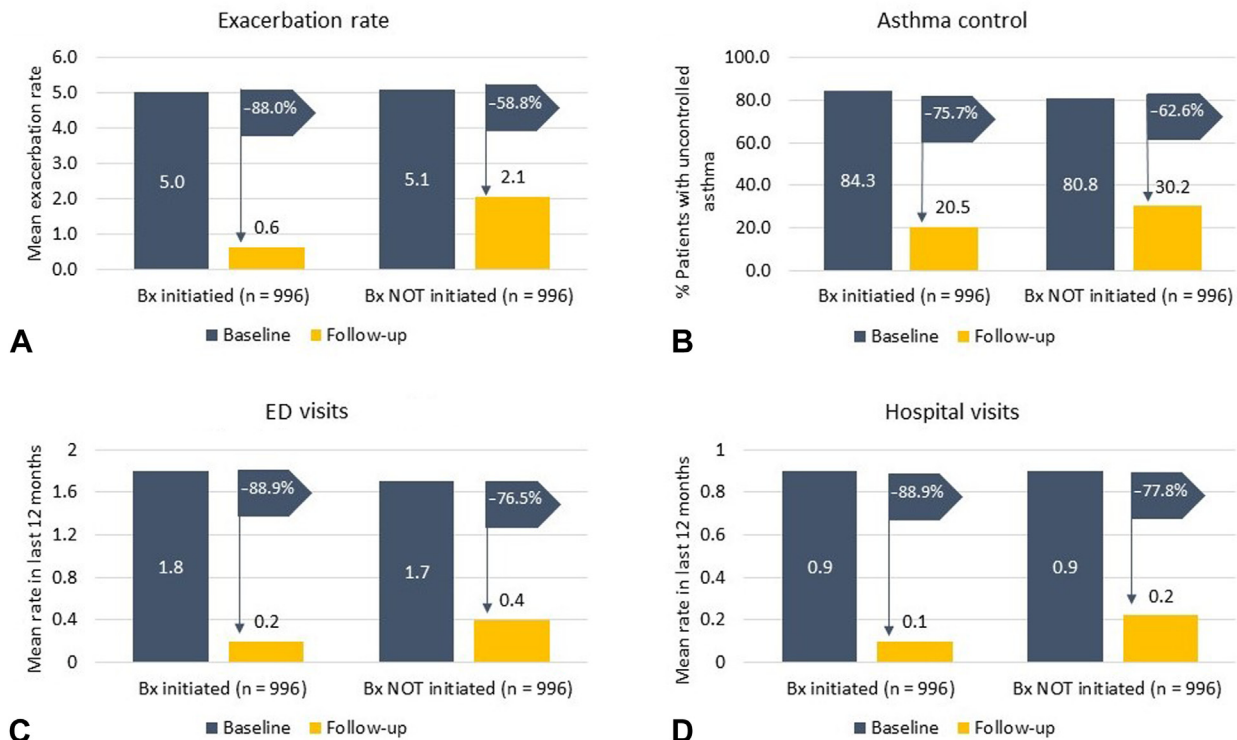


FIGURE 3. Change from baseline in (A) mean exacerbation rate/year,* (B) asthma control,† (C) asthma-related ED visit, and (D) asthma-related hospitalization in those who initiated and did not initiate biologic therapy. *Bx*, Biologic. *Defined as an event requiring rescue OCSs in the past year. †Asthma control was defined by GINA asthma control criteria,¹ Asthma Control Questionnaire,²⁹ or Asthma Control Test³⁰ in different settings.

Change from baseline in key efficacy variables

Improvements from baseline in asthma exacerbations and asthma control and reductions in HCRU (ie, asthma-related ED visits and hospitalizations) were noted both in those who initiated and in those who did not initiate biologic therapy. However, the improvements were greater in those who started biologics (Figure 3, A-D). For example, over a 12-month follow-up period, patients who initiated a biologic experienced an 88.0% reduction in exacerbation rate, compared with a 58.8% reduction in the biologic-not-initiated group (Figure 3, A). A similar differential between the biologic-initiated and the biologic-not-initiated groups was noted for asthma control (Figure 3, B), with superiority of the biologic-initiated group (vs the biologic-not-initiated group) also observed for the number of ED visits (Figure 3, C) and hospital admissions (Figure 3, D).

Exacerbation rate

In the regression analysis of propensity score-matched cohorts, biologic initiation was associated with an estimated average reduction of 1.43 exacerbations per year relative to the biologic-not-initiated group in the first year (0.64 vs 2.06; rate ratio, 0.27 [95% CI, 0.10-0.71]), corresponding to a 72.9% reduction (Figure 4). This pattern of estimated rate reduction remained consistent across age, sex, smoking status, BMI, and eosinophilic phenotypic categories.

OCS exposure

Patients who initiated a biologic were 2.48 times more likely to achieve a daily total OCS dose (ie, maintenance plus burst) of

less than 5 mg compared with the biologic-not-initiated group (estimated risk probability of 38.0% vs 15.3%; $P = .011$) and 2.20 times more likely to achieve a daily long-term OCS dose (ie, maintenance dose only) of less than 5 mg (risk probability, 49.6% vs 22.5%; $P = .002$). Compared with those who did not initiate a biologic, those who initiated a biologic were also 3.82 times (95% CI, 1.58-9.25) more likely to have a moderate (50% to $\leq 75\%$) total OCS reduction from baseline (risk probability, 16.2% vs 5.5%; $P = .001$) and tended to be 7.73 times (95% CI, 0.71-84.27) more likely to have an optimal ($>75\%$) total OCS reduction (risk probability, 13.4% vs 3.3%; $P = .063$) (Table III).

Asthma control and OCS-related comorbidities

No significant difference in the likelihood of having controlled asthma was observed within the first year (biologic-initiated vs biologic-not-initiated relative risk for staying uncontrolled was 0.66 [95% CI, 0.37-1.16]). Likewise, the 365-day risk of any new OCS-related comorbidity was very low in both groups, and the difference was uncertain given the wide CIs of relative risks (Table IV).

Health care resource utilization

Initiation of biologics was associated with a reduction in risk of asthma-related ED visits by 0.09, corresponding to a 65.0% reduction ($P = .003$) compared with the biologic-not-initiated group. Adjusted ED visit in the first year was 0.12 for those who initiated biologics compared with 0.33 for those who did not (rate ratio, 0.26 [95% CI, 0.14-0.48]) (Table V). Biologic

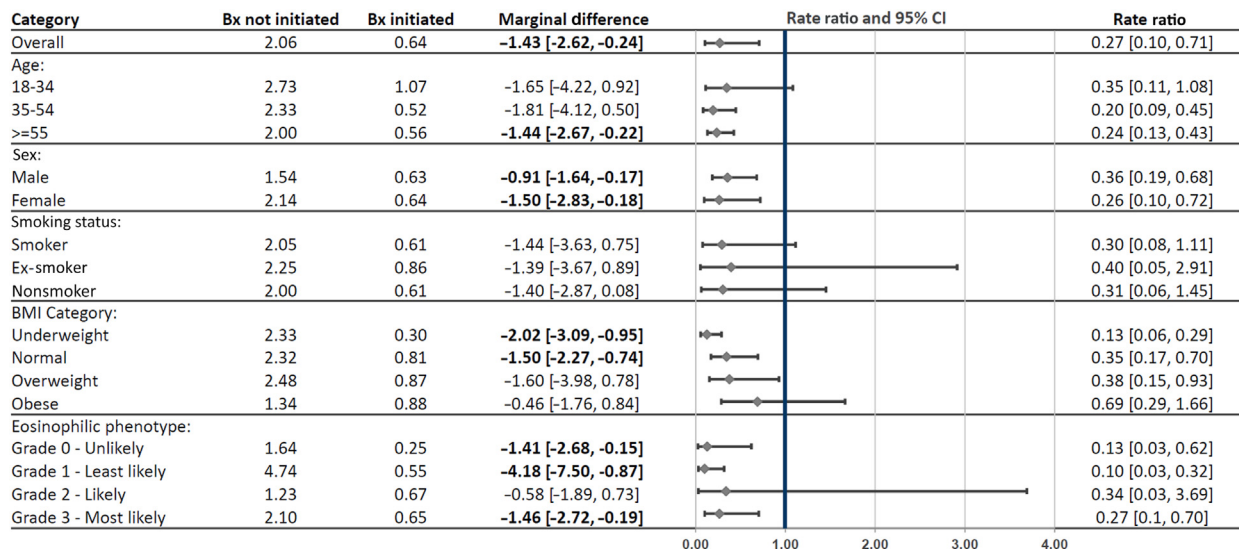


FIGURE 4. Effectiveness of biologic initiation vs noninitiation on mean exacerbation rate (in the next 365 days)* reduction in patients with severe asthma and high OCS exposure. Results are expressed as marginal rate difference (95% CI) and rate ratio (95% CI). *Bx*, Biologic. *Sample sizes vary because outcomes were not reported for all patients. The following are the number of per-patient observations used in the regression provided for each category for the biologic-not-initiated group and the biologic-initiated group, respectively: overall (n = 634/n = 801); age 18 to 34 years (n = 127/n = 111); age 35 to 54 years (n = 251/n = 345); age 55 years or more (n = 256/n = 345); male (n = 174/n = 316); female (n = 460/n = 485); smoker (n = 63/n = 18); ex-smoker (n = 128/n = 219); nonsmoker (n = 443/n = 219); underweight (n = 87/n = 11); normal weight (n = 137/n = 216); overweight (n = 175/n = 256); obese (n = 236/n = 318); grade 0 (n = 25/n = 3); grade 1 (n = 28/n = 24); grade 2 (n = 86/n = 51); and grade 3 (n = 496/n = 719). Exacerbation is defined as an event requiring rescue OCSs in the past year. Eosinophilic phenotype grades (0-3) are defined according to a previously published algorithm (Figure E1).⁶

therapy initiation was also associated with a 0.07 reduction in risk of experiencing any asthma-related hospitalization (69% reduction; *P* = .001), with the first-year frequency of asthma-

related hospitalizations of the biologic-initiated group being 25% of that of the biologic-not-initiated group (95% CI, 0.13-0.48; Table V).

TABLE III. Effectiveness of biologic initiation vs noninitiation on OCS reduction in 365 d

Outcome	Biologic not initiated	Biologic initiated	Marginal difference in % probability (95% CI)	Relative risk (95% CI)
Total OCSs				
% With†	N = 331*	N = 1071*		
Increased dose	27.6	16.0	-11.6 (-29.8 to 6.7)	0.51 (0.17 to 1.51)
Low reduction	63.6	54.4	-9.2 (-24.8 to 6.4)	0.87 (0.61 to 1.24)
Moderate reduction	5.5	16.2	10.7 (4.2 to 17.3)	3.82 (1.58 to 9.25)
Optimal reduction	3.3	13.4	10.0 (-0.6 to 20.7)	7.73 (0.71 to 84.27)
Long-term OCSs				
% With†	N = 311*	N = 1066*		
Increased dose	14.3	8.6	-5.7 (-18.0 to 6.5)	0.51 (0.12 to 2.17)
Low reduction	73.6	68.5	-5.1 (-22.5 to 12.3)	0.94 (0.69 to 1.28)
Moderate reduction	4.2	8.9	4.8 (-1.7 to 11.2)	2.55 (0.78 to 8.37)
Optimal reduction	7.9	14.0	6.1 (-7.7 to 19.9)	4.16 (0.21 to 82.18)

*No. of time-series observations; sample sizes vary because outcomes are not reported for all patients. The following are the numbers for each category for biologic-not-initiated and biologic-initiated groups, respectively: *Total OCSs*: total (n = 331/n = 1071); increased dose (n = 89/n = 118); low reduction (n = 203/n = 464); moderate reduction (n = 21/n = 173); and optimal reduction (n = 18/n = 316); *Long-term OCSs*: total (n = 311/n = 1066); increased dose (n = 48/n = 86); low reduction (n = 220/n = 597); moderate reduction (n = 12/n = 123); and optimal reduction (n = 31/n = 260).

†Increased dose (<0% reduction), low dose reduction (0% to ≤50%), moderate dose reduction (>50% to ≤75%), and optimal dose reduction (>75%).

TABLE IV. Effectiveness of biologic initiation vs noninitiation on asthma control* and new incidence of OCS-related comorbidities† in 365 d

	Biologic not initiated	Biologic initiated	Marginal difference in % probability (95% CI)	Relative risk (95% CI)
<i>Asthma control</i>				
% Patients	N = 177‡	N = 354‡		
Well controlled	49.5	51.1	1.6 (−22.0 to 25.2)	1.04 (0.58 to 1.84)
Partly controlled	20.3	28.5	8.1 (−16.1 to 32.3)	1.57 (0.46 to 5.38)
Uncontrolled	30.2	20.5	−9.7 (−22.7 to 3.2)	0.66 (0.37 to 1.16)
<i>Comorbidity incidence</i>				
% Patients with	N = 252‡	N = 380‡		
Any OCS-related comorbidity	0.18	2.31	2.13 (−1.81 to 6.07)	12.74 (1.12 to 144.82)
Any OCS-related chronic comorbidity	0.11	2.00	1.88 (−1.58 to 5.35)	26.02 (0.22 to 3025.63)

*Assessed by GINA asthma control criteria,¹ Asthma Control Questionnaire,²⁹ or Asthma Control Test.³⁰

†New OCS-related comorbidities include osteoporosis, heart failure, myocardial infarction, stroke, pulmonary embolism, glaucoma, cataract, renal failure, depression, anxiety, T2 diabetes, peptic ulcer, pneumonia, and obstructive sleep apnea. OCS-related chronic comorbidities include osteoporosis, heart failure, myocardial infarction, stroke, pulmonary embolism, glaucoma, cataract, renal failure, T2 diabetes, peptic ulcer, and obstructive sleep apnea.

‡No. of patients; sample sizes vary because outcomes are not reported for all patients. The following are the numbers for each category for biologic-not-initiated and biologic-initiated groups, respectively: *Asthma control*: total (n = 177/n = 354); well controlled (n = 83/n = 164); partly controlled (n = 50/n = 104); and uncontrolled (n = 44/n = 86); *Comorbidity incidence*: total (n = 9/n = 70); any OCS-related comorbidity (n = 6/n = 39); and any OCS-related chronic comorbidity (n = 3/n = 31).

DISCUSSION

Accurate estimation of biologic effectiveness in real life is important, because it may influence guideline recommendations for biologic use, as well as access, choice, and cost-effectiveness of prescribed biologics. In this global study, we assessed biologic effectiveness across a range of clinical outcomes in patients with severe asthma and HOCS to reflect the overuse and overreliance on OCS in real life,^{14,31} considering their potential to cause serious side effects and irreversible harm.^{12,13} We found that improvement in exacerbation rate, asthma control, and HCRU occurred in patients with severe asthma and HOCS irrespective of subsequent biologic initiation, highlighting the value of severe asthma services especially in terms of background therapy choice and adherence. However, those patients who initiated biologics showed the greatest improvements, exhibiting a 72.9% greater reduction in exacerbation rate and approximately one-third the risk and frequency of asthma-related ED visits and hospitalizations (ie, serious exacerbations) compared with patients who did not initiate a biologic treatment. These additional benefits are likely caused by direct effects of biologics themselves over and above those associated with tertiary care management in these

patients with evidence of eosinophilic asthma, a phenotype associated with more severe exacerbations and poorer asthma control.³² Initiation of biologic therapy may also have cost-saving potential considering that the mean direct cost of treating a hospitalization for a severe exacerbation has recently been estimated at €4997 per exacerbation.³³ This superiority of biologics was noted within an environment of improving asthma control in both groups as well as reduced OCS exposure in the biologic group. Patients who initiated biologics had a 2 times higher chance of achieving a daily long-term OCS dose of less than 5 mg and a 4 times higher chance of reducing their total OCS dose by more than 75% from baseline than patients who did not initiate a biologic.

Despite available care, recurrent asthma exacerbations are an issue in a proportion of patients with severe asthma.^{2,34} RCT data have found a biologic-associated reduction in exacerbation rate of 49% for benralizumab,³⁵ 47% for mepolizumab,³⁶ 26% for omalizumab,³⁷ 41% to 50% for reslizumab,³⁸ and 48% for dupilumab,³⁹ and a 58.8% reduction compared with biologic noninitiators and an 88.0% reduction relative to baseline observed in the present study (all biologics combined). This is

TABLE V. HCRU in 365 d

Outcome	Biologic not initiated	Biologic initiated	Marginal difference	Relative risk (for risk)/rate ratio (for rate)
	N = 502*	N = 661*		
Risk of ED visit	14% [9%, 20%]	6% [4%, 7%]	−9% [−14%, −3%]	0.35 [0.21, 0.58]
Rate of ED visit	0.33 [0.12, 0.55]	0.12 [0.05, 0.20]	−0.21 [−0.37, 0.05]	0.26 [0.14, 0.48]
	N = 514*	N = 667*		
Risk of hospitalization	12% [8%, 16%]	5% [4%, 7%]	−7% [−10%, −3%]	0.31 [0.18, 0.52]
Rate of hospitalization	0.23 [0.13, 0.33]	0.10 [0.06, 0.14]	−0.13 [−0.23, −0.04]	0.25 [0.13, 0.48]

Square brackets represent the 95% confidence interval of the effect size.

*N is the per-patient observations used in the regression analysis.

remarkably similar to the 81% reduction in exacerbation rate recently reported for benralizumab in a real-life cohort of patients with severe asthma in the United Kingdom, an effect that was independent of previous biologic use.⁴⁰ Improved effectiveness of biologics in the present study may be a consequence of a broader and more heterogeneous population, the size of the study, or differences in the extent of OCS exposure and associated baseline exacerbation rate in the populations studied. Biologic use has also previously been associated with exacerbation rate reduction outside the controlled settings of RCTs, but results have been variable (ranging from a 30% to a 69% reduction),^{19,41,42} likely because of differences in the background characteristics of the biologic users in real-world settings. Our findings and those of others, therefore, confirm the usefulness of biologics in reducing the considerable exacerbation burden experienced by patients with severe asthma, and their potential for cost-saving in terms of reduced HCRU. Indeed, in the present study, biologic use was associated with a marked reduction in the risk of asthma-related hospitalizations.

It has been estimated that up to 60% of patients with severe asthma are prescribed OCSs,⁴³ and although OCSs undoubtedly have a place in short bursts for the treatment of exacerbations, steroid-related adverse events are common.¹³ Several steroid-sparing strategies are now available to physicians including referral to specialist asthma centers, improving adherence to treatment, adding on therapies such as long-lasting muscarinic antagonists and macrolides, and treating with biologics.^{1,43} In our study, patients treated with biologics were 2.48 times more likely to have a moderate long-term OCS reduction and 2.20 times more likely to achieve a daily long-term OCS dose of less than 5 mg, in agreement with other real-life studies, albeit in a small number of patients.^{17,19,44} For example, the real world corticosteroid-sparing effect of mepolizumab in patients with severe asthma study found that mepolizumab reduced daily OCS dose by 50% after 21 to 24 weeks of treatment.¹⁹ The value of OCS reduction with biologic therapy is clear, but perhaps we can be even more aggressive and institute personalized OCS-tapering algorithms as advocated by the oral corticosteroid elimination via a personalized reduction algorithm in adults with severe asthma trial.⁴⁵ Real-world evidence is needed to bridge the gap between clinical trials and clinical practice and to examine the long-term impact of steroid reduction on new OCS-related adverse events.

We found no difference in asthma control between the biologic-initiated and the biologic-not-initiated groups; both groups showed marked improvement in asthma control from baseline (see Figure 2, B). This could be a consequence of referral to, and management in, a severe asthma service. Detection of a positive control signal was also challenging in the present study because control was assessed categorically, making it more difficult to show a small change, particularly in an environment of clinical improvement. Interestingly, the European Academy of Allergy and Clinical Immunology also concluded in its recent systematic review of biologics that although some biologics probably improve asthma control with moderate certainty of evidence, none of them showed an improvement above the

minimal important difference threshold of 0.5.¹⁵ Others have postulated that this may be because either asthma control does not indicate improvements caused by reduced eosinophilic airway inflammation or a dissociation exists between symptoms and exacerbations in patients with severe asthma.⁴⁶ We also did not see the expected reduction in new incidence of OCS-related comorbidities in the biologic-initiated group, but our study was not designed to do so, and the few observed incidences and wide CIs introduced a high level of uncertainty in these findings. However, patients in the biologic-initiated group were more likely to have an OCS dose reduction than patients in the biologic-not-initiated group. A longer follow-up time may be required to observe this effect. Others have also found a disconnect between OCS reduction and toxicity.⁴⁷

Study limitations

Limitations of this study include those common to all observational studies, such as recall bias, as well as the potential for an initiation bias due to differences in socioeconomic and geographical factors not accounted for in the matching. Results may have been influenced by missing data, the uneven distribution of patients on each biologic, which was a consequence of the date of data development and requirement for a 1-year follow-up period, and intercountry variability in biologic access criteria.²³ This latter issue has been mitigated in another ISAR study, which found that anti-IL-5/5R biologics were more effective than anti-IgE in patients eligible for, and with access to, both classes.⁴⁸ In addition, there may be some confounding by country (eg, the United Kingdom was overrepresented in the biologic-initiated group, which may have skewed findings); however, this was accounted for during propensity score matching. Strengths of our study are the inclusion of a large, multinational severe and heterogeneous asthma cohort, generalizable to the severe asthma population. Rigorous statistical analyses were also used, including use of weighted and adjusted regression models and marginal effect estimates, and the potential for bias minimized by use of propensity score matching and multiple imputation.

CONCLUSIONS

In a real-world setting, initiation of biologics is associated with reduced exacerbation rate, OCS exposure, and HCRU in patients with severe asthma and HOCS.

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Italy

Sites

Personalized Medicine, Asthma & Allergy, Humanitas Clinical and Research Center, IRCCS, Rozzano, MI

UOC Allergology Department, Piacenza

Department of Experimental and Clinical Biomedical Sciences "Mario Serio", Respiratory Unit, Careggi University Hospital, Florence

Departmental Unit of Allergology and Pneumology, Hospital Institute Fondazione Poliambulanza, Brescia

Department of Internal Medicine, Clinical Immunology, Clinical Pathology and Infectious Diseases, Azienda Ospedaliera Universitaria Federico II, Naples

Department of Clinical and Biological Sciences, University of Turin, San Luigi Hospital, Orbassano, Turin

Department of Clinical and Biomedical Sciences, University of Milan, Respiratory Diseases, Sacco University Hospital, ASST Fatebenefratelli-Sacco, Milan

Pneumology Unit, Santa Maria Nuova Hospital, Azienda USL di Reggio Emilia IRCCS

Unit of Immunology, Rheumatology, Allergy and Rare Diseases, IRCCS San Raffaele Scientific Institute, Milan

Division of Respiratory Diseases, Department of Promoting Health, Maternal-Infant. Excellence and Internal and Specialized Medicine (Promise) G. D'Alessandro, University of Palermo, Palermo

Allergy and Clinical Immunology Unit, Department of Medicine, "Carlo Poma" Hospital, Mantova

Respiratory Medicine, Department of Medical Sciences, University of Turin

Respiratory Unit and Adult Cystic Fibrosis Center, And Department of Pathophysiology and Transplantation, Fondazione IRCCS Cà Granda, Ospedale Maggiore Policlinico, University of Milan

Department of Medicine and Surgery, University of Parma

Division of Allergy and Clinical Immunology, University of Salerno, Fisciano

Respiratory Department, Division of Respiratory Diseases "Federico II" University, AO Dei Colli, Naples

Allergy and Clinical Immunology, University of Turin & AO Mauriziano, Turin

Division of Pneumology and Allergology, Policlinico, University of Catania

Allergy Unit, Fondazione Policlinico A. Gemelli, IRCCS, Rome

Department of Medicine, Allergy Unit Asthma Center, University of Verona

Department of Translational Medical Sciences, University of Campania "L. Vanvitelli", Naples

Department of Clinical and Experimental Sciences, University of Brescia, Spedali Civili, Brescia

Department of Emergency and Organ Transplantation, School and Chair of Allergology and Clinical Immunology, University of Bari Aldo Moro, Bari

Fondazione Policlinico Universitario A. Gemelli, IRCCS Catholic University of Rome

Department of Pharmacology, Faculty of Medicine Catholic, University of the Sacred Heart Fondazione Policlinico Universitario A. Gemelli IRCCS, Rome

Division of Respiratory Diseases, IRCCS Policlinico San Matteo, Foundation and Department of Internal Medicine and Therapeutics, University of Pavia

University of Insubria, ICS Maugeri, IRCCS, Varese

(continued)

(Continued)

Sites

Section of Respiratory Diseases, Medical and Surgical Sciences Department, University of Foggia

Department of Medical and Surgical Sciences, Section of Respiratory Diseases, University Magna Graecia, Catanzaro

Department of Surgery, Medicine, Molecular Biology and Critical Care, University of Pisa

Argentina

Sites**Investigators**

Fundacion CIDEA	Jorge Maspero Veronica Lawriwskyj Mónica De Gennaro Evelyn Sureda
Fernandez Hospital Buenos Aires	Diego Litewka
Investigaciones en Patologias Respiratorias	Ana Stok Yasmin García Castañeda

Australia

Sites**Investigators**

Austin Hospital, VIC	Michael Sutherland Joy Lee
Campbelltown Hospital, NSW	Connie Katelaris
Concord Hospital, NSW	Claude Farah Matthew Peters
Fiona Stanley Hospital, WA	Li Ping Chung
Flinders Medical Centre, SA	Jeffrey Bowden
Frankston Hospital, VIC	David Langton
John Hunter Hospital, NSW	Peter Gibson
Monash Health, VIC	AKM Nizam Uddin Philip Bardin
Princess Alexandra Hospital, QLD	John Upham
Royal Adelaide Hospital, SA	Paul Reynolds
Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, NSW	Helen Reddel
St George Specialist Centre, NSW	Greg Katsoulotos
St Vincent Clinic, NSW	Janet Rimmer
The Alfred Hospital, VIC	Mark Hew Andrew Gillman
The Prince Charles Hospital, QLD	Ian Yang
Western Health, Footscray, VIC	Anne Marie Southcott
Woolcock Institute of Medical Research, NSW	Peter Gibson

Bulgaria

Sites**Investigators**

BGRCHO, Varna	Cvetanka Hristova Odzhakova
BGRDPD, Plovdiv	Darina Petrova Dimova
BGRDXH, Sofia	Diana X. Hristova
BGREMS, Sofia	Eleonora M. Stamenova
BGRKVN, Pazardzhik	Katya Vasileva Noeva
BGRVMV, Dupnica	Violina Milchova Vasileva

Canada

Sites	Investigators
University of British Columbia— Vancouver Coastal Health	J. Mark FitzGerald Celine Bergeron Shelley Abercromby
University of British Columbia— Providence Health Care	Mohsen Sadatsafavi
University of Alberta	Mohit Bhutani
Toronto Western Hospital	Kenneth Chapman
University Institute of Cardiology and Respiriology of Quebec	Andréanne Côté Louis-Philippe Boulet

Colombia

Sites	Investigators
Fundación Neumológica Colombiana, Bogotá	Carlos A. Torres-Duque Patricia Parada
Instituto Neumológico del Oriente, Bucaramanga	Leslie Vargas Diana Jimena Cano Rosales Fabio Bolivar
Hospital Universitario San Ignacio, Bogotá	Carlos Andrés Celis Preciado Norma Andrea Ruiz Claudia Robayo

Denmark

Sites	Investigators
Aarhus University Hospital	Johannes Schmid Anne-Sofie Bjerrum
Bispebjerg University Hospital	Celeste M. Porsbjerg
Gentofte University Hospital	Linda M. Rasmussen Truls Ingebrigtsen
Hvidovre University Hospital	Charlotte S. Ulrik
Odense University Hospital	Sofie Johansson
Roskilde University Hospital	Lycely Dongo
Vejle Hospital	Ole Hilberg

Greece

Sites	Investigators
Attikon University Hospital, Chaidari	Andriana I. Papaioannou Maria Ntakoula Anastasia Papaporfuriou
University Hospital of Ioánnina, Ioánnina	Athena Gogali Kostis Exarchos Konstantinos Kostikas

India

Sites	Investigators
Fortis Hospital, Kolkata, West Bengal D. Y. Patil Hospital, Navi Mumbai, Maharashtra	Sundeep Salvi

Ireland

Sites	Investigators
Royal College of Surgeons	Breda Cushen Deirdre Long

United Kingdom

Sites
Belfast Health & Social Care Trust
Royal Brompton and Harefield Hospitals, London
Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust
Barts Health NHS Trust

Japan

Sites	Investigators
Hiroshima Allergy and Respiratory Clinic	Soichiro Hozawa
Kindai University Hospital	Yuji Tohda
Idaimae Minamiyojo Clinic	Tanaka Hiroshi
National Mie Hospital	Nogami Kazutaka
Kobe University Hospital	Tatsuya Nagano Yoshihiro Nishimura
Kyoto University Hospital	Oguma Tsuyoshi Matsumo Hisako
Mie University Hospital	Nogami Kazutaka
Sagamihara National Hospital	Sekiya Kiyoshi
Kochi Medical School Hospital	Hiroshi Ohnishi
Nagoya City University Hospital	Niimi Akio Tomoko Tajiri
Dokkyo Medical University Hospital	Fukuda Hironobu
Iwasaki Clinic	Iwasaki Yoshikazu
Kinki Hokuriku Airway Disease Conference	

Kuwait

Sites	Investigators
Kuwait University, Faculty of Medicine Al-Rashed Allergy Center, Ministry of Health, Kuwait	Mona Al-Ahmad
The Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences	

Mexico

Sites	Investigators
Hospital Médica Sur, Mexico City	Désirée Larenas-Linnemann
Centro de Atención de Enfermedades Cardiopulmonares, Guadalajara	Ricardo Campos Cerda
ISSSTE Hospital Regional Lic. Adolfo López Mateos, Mexico City	Lilia Margarita Borboa

South Korea

Sites	Investigators
Seoul St Mary's Hospital	Chin Kook Rhee
Konkuk University Hospital	Kwang-Ha Yoo Youlim Kim
Yeouido St Mary's Hospital	Hyoung Kyu Yoon
Ulsan University Hospital	Seung-Won Ra
Haeundae Paik Hospital	Jae Ha Lee
Hallym University Chuncheon Sacred Heart Hospital	Youlim Kim
Hanyang University Hospital	Sang Heon Kim
Hallym University Kangdong Sacred Heart Hospital	Yong Bum Park

Saudi Arabia

Sites	Investigators
King Fahad Medical City, Riyadh	Riyad Al-Lehebi
King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah	Siraj Wali Yahya Habis

Spain

Sites	Investigators
Hospital Lucus Augusti, EOXI Lugo, Cervo e Monforte	Dacal Dacalrivias
Hospital Universitario Son Espases, Palma de Mallorca	Amanda Iglesias
Hospital Universitario de Cruces, Barakaldo, Bizkaia	N. Marina Malanda
Hospital Sta Creu i Sant Pau, Barcelona	Vincet Plaza
University Hospital San Agustín, Avilés	J. A. Gullón Blanco
Hospital Bellvitge, Barcelona	M. Muñoz Esquerre
Hospital 12 de Octubre, Madrid	R. Díaz Campos

Taiwan

Sites	Investigators
Taipei Veterans General Hospital	Diahn-Wang Perng (Steve) Ko Hsin-Kuo (Bruce)
Taipei Medical University, Shuang Ho Hospital	Kang-Yun Lee Kuan-Yuan Chen Erick Wan-Chun Huang
China Medical University Hospital	Liang-Wen Hang
Kaohsiung Medical University Hospital	Chau-Chyun Sheu Ming-Ju Tsai

United Arab Emirates

Sites	Investigators
Rashid Hospital, Dubai	Bassam Mqboub Nizam Iqbal

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