independent predictor of relapse risk, highlighting the need for a correct characterization of the clinical subtype at the early stages of disease.

Disclosure of Interests: Sara Monti: None declared, Lorenzo Dagna Grant/ research support from: Abbvie, BMS, Celgene, Janssen, MSD, Mundipharma Pharmaceuticals, Novartis, Pfizer, Roche, SG, SOBI, Consultant of: Abbvie, Amgen, Biogen, BMS, Celltrion, Novartis, Pfizer, Roche, SG, and SOBI, Corrado Campochiaro Speakers bureau: Novartis, Pfizer, Roche, GSK, SOBI, Alessandro Tomelleri: None declared, Giovanni Zanframundo: None declared, Catherine Klersy: None declared, Francesco Muratore: None declared, Luigi Boiardi: None declared, Roberto Padoan: None declared, Mara Felicetti: None declared, Franco Schiavon: None declared, Milena Bond: None declared, Alvise Berti: None declared, Roberto Bortolotti: None declared, Carlotta Nannini: None declared, Fabrizio Cantini: None declared, Alessandro Giollo: None declared, Edoardo Conticini: None declared, angelica gattamelata: None declared, Roberta Priori: None declared, Luca Quartuccio Consultant of: Abbvie, Bristol, Speakers bureau: Abbvie, Pfizer, Elena Treppo: None declared, Giacomo Emmi: None declared, Martina Finocchi: None declared, Giulia Cassone: None declared, Ariela Hoxha Speakers bureau: Celgene, UCB, Novartis, Sanofi, Werfen, Rosario Foti Consultant of: Lilly, sanofi, MSD, Janssen, Abbvie, BMS, Celgene, roche, Speakers bureau: Lilly, sanofi, MSD, Janssen, Abbvie, BMS, Celgene, roche, Michele Colaci: None declared, Roberto Caporali Consultant of: AbbVie; Gilead Sciences, Inc.; Lilly; Merck Sharp & Dohme; Celgene; Bristol-Myers Squibb; Pfizer; UCB, Speakers bureau: Abbvie; Bristol-Myers Squibb; Celgene; Lilly; Gilead Sciences, Inc.; MSD; Pfizer; Roche; UCB, Carlo Salvarani: None declared, Carlomaurizio Montecucco: None declared
DOI: 10.1136/annrheumdis-2020-eular.3779

FRI0213

ASSOCIATION BETWEEN SPECIMEN LENGTH AND NUMBER OF SECTIONS AND DIAGNOSTIC YIELD OF TEMPORAL ARTERY BIOPSY: A RETROSPECTIVE, SINGLE CENTER EXPERIENCE OVER A 21 YEARS' PERIOD

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Background: Temporal artery biopsy (TAB) showing inflammation is considered the gold standard for the diagnosis of giant cell arteritis (GCA). However, sampling error may lead to a negative TAB, and a negative TAB does not rule out GCA. The diagnostic sensitivity of TAB can be affected by the discontinuous character of the histopathologic changes (skip lesions) and by the length of specimens. The optimal TAB length and the optimal number of sections that need to be evaluated in order to avoid missing skip lesions are controversial.

Objectives: To investigate the association between specimen length and number of section and the diagnostic yield of TAB for GCA.

Methods: A pathologist with expertise in vasculitis and blinded to clinical data and final diagnosis reviewed all TABs performed for suspected GCA at our hospital between January 1991 and December 2012. The biopsies were routinely fixed in formalin and completely embedded in paraffin. Sections of 4 microns thickness were cut from paraffin blocks and stained with hematoxylin-eosin. TABs were classified into three categories: inadequate, when the biopsy did not sample the muscular artery; negative when the temporal artery was devoid of inflammation and positive when the temporal artery showed inflammation, arbitrarily defined as at least 1 aggregate of at least 15 inflammatory cells. The blocks of all the inadequate and negative biopsies were recut, and at least three further slides at deeper levels were stained with hematoxylin-eosin.

Results: 694 TABs were performed in the study period and were reviewed. 32 (4.6%) were classified as inadequate and were excluded from the analysis. Of the remaining 662 TABs [71% female; mean (SD) age, 73.2 (8.8) years], mean (SD) post fixation length was 6.63 (4.42) mm, and median number of sections evaluated was 3 (range 1-33). 382 (58%) TABs were classified as negative and 280 (42%) as positive. Compared with negative TAB, patients with positive TAB were older [mean age (SD) 74 (7.5) years vs 72 (9.6), $p=0.009$] and there was a trend for female predominance (75% vs 68%, $p=0.077$). Post fixation length of the specimens was significantly lower in negative compared with positive TAB [mean (SD) 6.37 (4.26) mm vs 6.99 (4.61) respectively, $p=0.026$]. Piecewise logistic regression identified 5 mm as the TAB length change point for diagnostic sensitivity. Compared with TAB length of <5 mm, age- and sex-adjusted odds ratio for positive TAB in samples ≥ 5 mm long were 1.536 (95% confidence interval, 1.108 to 2.130).

The median (IQR) number of sections evaluated were 2 (1-3) for positive TAB and 4 (2-5) for negative TAB, $p<0.0001$. In 26/280 (9.3%) positive TABs, the first section was negative, and the inflammation was detected only in deeper sections (the positive section was the second in 14 TABs, the third in 9 and the fourth in 3). In all 26 cases, inflammation detected in deeper section was not transmural, but limited to adventitial or periadventitial small vessels.

Conclusion: Our data confirm that a post fixation TAB length of at least 5 mm should be sufficient to make a histological diagnosis of inflamed temporal artery. According to our data, in order to avoid missing skip inflammatory lesions, at least 3 further sections at deeper levels should be cut and evaluated in all negative TABs.

Disclosure of Interests: None declared

DOI: 10.1136/annrheumdis-2020-eular.5485

FRI0214

PERSISTENT LOW-GRADE FDG-PET VASCULAR INFLAMMATION IN REMITTED LVV-GCA PATIENTS IS ASSOCIATED TO A SIGNIFICANT HIGH RISK OF RELAPSE

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Background: Persistent low-grade vascular inflammation in giant cell arteritis (GCA) with large vessel involvement (LVV) treated patients could represent the expression of persistent subclinical disease activity or post-inflammatory vascular remodelling. Whether these findings have any impact on future vascular outcomes is still an unmet need.

Objectives: To evaluate the frequency and evolution of FDG-PET low-grade vascular inflammation in remitted LVV-GCA patients.

Methods: We included all consecutive patients classified as GCA with LVV involvement, with a minimum disease duration of 12 months and clinically remitted, who underwent to at least one PET/MR scan between January 2015 and January 2020. For each scan vessel's metabolic activity was assessed using the Meller's grading¹. Low-grade inflammation was defined as Meller 1 and 2 (inferior or equal to liver), as reported in previous studies. Demographic and clinical data, as well as disease remission or flares, were recorded and compared to vascular metabolic activity.

Results: In total 88 PET scans were performed in 54 LVV-GCA patients, predominantly female (77.8%), aged 68[7.8] years, with a regular BMI (23.9[2.8]) and with a long-standing disease (27[32.6] months). A subsequent PET/MR scan was available in 34 patients (median time between the two scans 9[6.3] months).

At first PET examination, low-grade metabolic activity was reported in 68,5% of the cases, while complete remission in 15% and high metabolic activity in 25%. Comparing patients with low-grade vascular inflammation to those with complete remission (Meller 0), they had lower disease duration (28[25.9] vs 73[68] months, but without significance) and they were treated with higher daily prednisone dosage (5[3.8] vs 0[2.2], $p=0.042$). No significant differences were noted in age, acute phase reactants and type of treatment. Moreover, when compared to those with high metabolic activity (Meller 3), the latter had only significantly higher CRP levels (8.3[13.8] vs 4.1[3.9], $p=0.03$) and lower disease duration (19[20.6] vs 28[25.9] months, but without significance). While no significant differences were noted in age and type of treatment (both glucocorticoids and immunosuppressants).

Among all patients with low-grade vascular inflammation, 81% of them underwent to steroids or immunosuppressants tapering due to clinical remission. At the subsequent PET examination, a worsening of metabolic activity (Meller 3) was found in 4/20 patients, with 1 clinical flare. While in 14/20 patients the subsequent PET revealed a persistent metabolic activity. Only in 2/20 there was a complete metabolic remission. Change or increase of the treatment regimen led to an improvement (Meller 0 or 1) in all the cases. Low-grade metabolic activity was associated with a significant increased risk of worsening/flare at the subsequent PET examination (RR 5.29[1.87-16.11], $p=0.002$).

Conclusion: Low-grade vascular inflammation at PET examination is a common feature in remitted patients. It is associated with older age, lower disease duration and clinical remission. Treatment tapering is associated with an increased risk of worsening/flare. Further research is urgently needed to address this issue.

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Disclosure of Interests: Roberto Padoan: None declared, Alessandro Tomelleri: None declared, Mara Felicetti: None declared, Corrado Campochiaro