

## Rheumatic disease and COVID-19

We appreciated the letter from Monti *et al*, which was the first dedicated report of patients with rheumatic disease who have been diagnosed with COVID-19.<sup>1</sup> We have also reviewed the response from Joob and Wiwanitkit,<sup>2</sup> which unfortunately perpetuates the notion that individuals with systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) or other rheumatic disease may be protected from COVID-19 infection via hydroxychloroquine use. Although the origins of this claim are not entirely clear, they may arise from the fact that rheumatic or autoimmune diseases were not initially reported among other comorbidities in the first large Chinese case series.<sup>3–5</sup> Some of the subsequent publications have also not reported these conditions in their tables of baseline characteristics.<sup>6–8</sup>

However, as the aphorism goes, ‘the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence’. Instead, we have to consider the following: Were these comorbidities searched for, but not found? Or were they not included in the search at all? The latter is understandable and should not automatically be discounted as a methodological oversight. While the prospective collection of granular data would have been ideal, this was likely precluded by the sheer volume and urgency of medical care delivered during the early stages of the pandemic. With the global medical and scientific community awaiting clinical data, those first publications were eagerly welcomed for the information that they could provide on the exploding crisis.

It is worth noting that this paucity of data on the rheumatic disease population ultimately prompted the rheumatology community to form a global case registry.<sup>9</sup> In a report of the initial 110 patients from this registry, there were 19 with SLE who had been diagnosed with COVID-19.<sup>10</sup> In the USA especially, widespread testing has been delayed and has likely resulted in lower counts of COVID-19 cases.<sup>11</sup> Disparities in healthcare access, which are well documented in US patients with SLE,<sup>12</sup> may have further potentiated this under-reporting. Further data from rheumatology-specific registries are forthcoming, especially as confirmed case numbers continue to rise. We expect that we will learn more about the impact of COVID-19 on people living with rheumatic disease in due course.

Jean W Liew ,<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth R Graef<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Division of Rheumatology, Department of Medicine, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, USA

<sup>2</sup>Department of Surgery, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

**Correspondence to** Dr Jean W Liew, Division of Rheumatology, Department of Medicine, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195, USA; [liew.jw@gmail.com](mailto:liew.jw@gmail.com)

**Twitter** Jean W Liew @rheum\_cat and Elizabeth R Graef @situationrheum

**Contributors** Both authors contributed to this work.

**Funding** The authors have not declared a specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

**Competing interests** None declared.

**Patient and public involvement** Patients and/or the public were not involved in the design, conduct, reporting or dissemination plans of this research.

**Patient consent for publication** Not required.

**Provenance and peer review** Not commissioned; internally peer reviewed.

This article is made freely available for use in accordance with BMJ's website terms and conditions for the duration of the covid-19 pandemic or until otherwise determined by BMJ. You may use, download and print the article for any lawful, non-commercial purpose (including text and data mining) provided that all copyright notices and trade marks are retained.

© Author(s) (or their employer(s)) 2020. No commercial re-use. See rights and permissions. Published by BMJ.



**To cite** Liew JW, Graef ER. *Ann Rheum Dis* Epub ahead of print: [please include Day Month Year]. doi:10.1136/annrheumdis-2020-217674

Received 20 April 2020

Accepted 21 April 2020

*Ann Rheum Dis* 2020;**0**:1. doi:10.1136/annrheumdis-2020-217674

### ORCID iD

Jean W Liew <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8104-2450>

### REFERENCES

- Monti S, Balduzzi S, Delvino P, *et al*. Clinical course of COVID-19 in a series of patients with chronic arthritis treated with immunosuppressive targeted therapies. *Ann Rheum Dis* 2020. doi: 10.1136/annrheumdis-2020-217424.
- Joob B, Wiwanitkit V. SLE, hydroxychloroquine and NO SLE patients with covid-19: a comment. *Ann Rheum Dis* 2020. doi:10.1136/annrheumdis-2020-217506
- Huang C, Wang Y, Li X, *et al*. Clinical features of patients infected with 2019 novel coronavirus in Wuhan, China. *Lancet* 2020.
- Wu Z, McGoogan JM. Characteristics of and important lessons from the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak in China: summary of a report of 72 314 cases from the Chinese center for disease control and prevention. *JAMA* 2020.
- Guan W-jie, Ni Z-yi, Hu Y, *et al*. Clinical characteristics of coronavirus disease 2019 in China. *N Engl J Med* 2020.
- Grasselli G, Zangrillo A, Zanella A, *et al*. Baseline characteristics and outcomes of 1591 patients infected with SARS-CoV-2 admitted to ICUs of the Lombardy region, Italy. *JAMA* 2020. doi:10.1001/jama.2020.5394
- Arentz M, Yim E, Klaff L, *et al*. Characteristics and outcomes of 21 critically ill patients with COVID-19 in Washington state. *JAMA* 2020. doi:10.1001/jama.2020.4326
- Goyal P, Choi JJ, Pinheiro LC, *et al*. Clinical characteristics of Covid-19 in New York City. *N Engl J Med* 2020. doi:10.1056/NEJMc2010419
- Robinson PC, Yazdany J. The COVID-19 global rheumatology alliance: collecting data in a pandemic. *Nat Rev Rheumatol* 2020. doi:10.1038/s41584-020-0418-0
- Gianfrancesco MA, Hyrich KL, Gossec L, *et al*. Rheumatic disease and COVID-19: initial data from the COVID-19 global rheumatology alliance provider registries. *Lancet Rheumatol* 2020. doi:10.1016/S2665-9913(20)30095-3
- Maxmen A. Thousands of coronavirus tests are going unused in US Labs. *Nature* 2020;580:312–3.
- Anderson E, Nietert PJ, Kamen DL, *et al*. Ethnic disparities among patients with systemic lupus erythematosus in South Carolina. *J Rheumatol* 2008;35:819–25.