

Delaying surgery for patients with a previous SARS-CoV-2 infection

Editor

With at least 28 elective million operations delayed during the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of patients who will require surgery after a previous SARS-CoV-2 infection is likely to increase rapidly¹. Operating on patients with an active perioperative SARS-CoV-2 infection is now known to carry a very high pulmonary complication and mortality rate². Urgent information is needed to guide whether postponing surgery in patients with a previous SARS-CoV-2 infection leads to a clinical benefit, and the optimal length of delay.

The COVIDSurg-Cancer study was a prospective cohort study of patients undergoing curative elective cancer surgery during the COVID-19 pandemic up to 24 May 2020³. We performed a pre-planned subgroup analysis of patients undergoing surgery with previous SARS-CoV-2 positive swab that were not suspected to have active COVID-19 at the time of surgery. Propensity score matching was used to match previous SARS-CoV-2 swab positive patients to patients with no a positive swab test in a 1:4 ratio. Multivariable logistic regression was used to explore associations of previous SARS-CoV-2 with rates of postoperative pulmonary complications and death in matched groups. Full methodology is available in the *Appendix*.

Of 122 patients with a previous positive SARS-CoV-2 swab, 22.1% ($n = 27$) were operated on within 2-weeks of diagnosis, 49.2% ($n = 60$) between 2 and 4 weeks, and 28.7% ($n = 35$) after 4 weeks. The number of infected patients increased during each month of the study period (*Supplementary Figure 1*). Patients underwent surgery in 78 hospitals from 16 countries, predominantly in

Italy ($n = 44$), UK ($n = 28$) and Spain ($n = 20$). 112 patients with a previous positive swab were matched to 448 patients with no positive swab. In the propensity score matched model, previous SARS-CoV-2 infection was associated with increased odds of pulmonary complications compared to no infection (10.7% [12/122] versus 3.6% [16/448], adjusted odds ratio 3.84, 95% confidence interval 1.51-9.74, $p = 0.004$, *Supplementary Figure 2*). When split by time from swab to surgery, both pulmonary complications and mortality were lowest at least 4 weeks after notification of a positive swab test (*Table 1*). However, 71.3% (87/122) of patients had surgery within 4 weeks of SARS-CoV-2 infection in this series.

There are significant limitations of these data, including risk of selection bias and a small sample size, meaning this data should be considered as exploratory. Until that time, this data provides the first signal that those with a positive SARS-CoV-2 swab pre-operatively should have their surgery delayed for at least 4 weeks after notification.

Further research is urgently needed to validate these figures in a larger series and explore differences in recovery between asymptomatic SARS-CoV-2 and symptomatic COVID-19. GlobalSurg-COVIDSurg Week is a multi-centre international snapshot study planned for October 2020 and will explore these research questions in detail. At the time of writing there are over 1300 centres registered in 105 countries, with representation across all surgical specialties. The study protocol and registration are available at: globalsurg.org/surgweek/

Collaborating authors (*PudMed-citable*)

Writing group

James C Glasbey, Dmitri Nepogodiev, Omar Omar, Joana FF Simoes,

Adesoji Ademuyiwa, Marco Fiore, Ana Minaya-Bravo, Richard Shaw, Raghavan Vidya, Aneel Bhangu (Guarantor).

Statistical analysis

James C Glasbey, Omar Omar (Lead statistician), Aneel A Bhangu.

International cancer leads

Neil Smart*, Ana Minaya-Bravo, Jon Evans, Susan Moug, Dale Vimalchandran, Abi Vallance Peter Pockney (Colorectal); Ewen Griffiths*, Sivesh Kamarajah, Richard Evans, Philip Townend (Oesophagogastric); Keith Roberts*, Siobhan McKay*, John Isaac, Sohei Sato (Hepatopancreatobiliary); John Edwards*, Aman Coonar, Adrian Marchbank, Edward Caruana, Georgia Layton, Akshay Patel, Alessandro Brunelli (Thoracics) Samuel Ford*, Anant Desai*, Alessandro Gronchi*, Marco Fiore Max Almond, Fabio Tirota, Sinziana Dumitra (Sarcoma); Angelos Kolias*, Stephen Price, Daniel Fountain, Michael Jenkinson, Peter Hutchinson, Hani Marcus, Rory Piper, Laura Lippa, Franco Servadei, Ignatius Esene, Christian Freyschlag, Iuri Neville, Gail Rosseau, Karl Schaller, Andreas Demetriades, Faith Robertson, Alex Alamri (Neurosurgery); Richard Shaw*, Andrew Schache, Stuart Winter, Michael Ho, Paul Nankivell, Juan Rey Biel Martin Batstone, Ian Ganly (Head & Neck); Raghavan Vidya*, Alex Wilkins, Japdeep Singn (Breast); Sudha Sundar*, Christina Fotopoulou*, Elaine Leung, Tabassum Khan, Luis Chiva, Jalid Sehoul, Anna Fagotti, Paul Cohen, Murat Gutelkin, Rahel Ghebrey, Thomas Konney, Rene Pareja, Rob Bristow, Sean Dowdy, Shylasree TS Rajkumar, Joe Ng, Keiji Fujiwara (Gynaecology); Grant Stewart*, Benjamin Lamb, Krishna Narahari, Alan McNeill, Alexandra Colquhoun, John McGrath, Steve Bromage,

Table 1 Outcomes of operated patients with a previous SARS-CoV-2 positive swab

30-day postoperative outcomes	Previous SARS-CoV-2 positive swab <i>N</i> = 122	Time from previous SARS-CoV-2 positive swab		
		1 to 2 weeks <i>N</i> = 27	2 to 4 weeks <i>N</i> = 60	> 4 weeks <i>N</i> = 35
Pulmonary complications	9.8% (5.2%-16.6%) 12/122	18.5% (6.3%-38.1%) 5/27	11.7% (4.8%-22.6%) 7/60	0.0% (0.0%-10.0%) 0/35
Mortality	3.4% (0.9%-8.4%) 4/119	7.7% (0.9%-25.1%) 2/26	3.4% (0.4%-11.7%) 2/59	0.0% (0.0%-10.3%) 0/34

Previous positive swab is defined as a confirmed SARS-CoV-2 infection by nasopharyngeal swab (qRT-PCR) greater than one week before the day of surgery. Postoperative pulmonary complications were defined as pneumonia, acute respiratory distress syndrome or unexpected ventilation. Outcomes were defined up to 30 days from the day of surgery with Day 0 as the day of surgery. Full definitions are available in the Appendix.

Ravi Barod, Veeru Kasivisvanathan (Urology); James C Glasbey (Chair).

Dissemination committee

Adesoji O Ademuyiwa, Arnav Agarwal, Ehab Al Ameer, Derek Alderson, Osaid Alser, Alexis P Arnaud, Knut Magne Augestad, Brittany Bankhead-Kendall, Ruth A Benson, Sohini Chakrabortee, Ruth Blanco-Colino, Amanpreet Brar, Ana Minaya Bravo, Kerry A Breen, Igor de Lima Buarque, Edward Caruana, Miguel F Cunha, Giana H Davidson, Anant Desai, Salomone Di Saverio, Thomas D Drake, John Edwards, Muhammed Elhadi, Shebani Farik, Marco Fiore, J Edward Fitzgerald, Samuel Ford, Gaetano Gallo, Dhruv Ghosh, Gustavo Mendonça Ataíde Gomes, Ewen Griffiths, Constantine Halkias, Ewen M Harrison, Peter Hutchinson, Arda Isik, Haytham Kaafarani, Angelos Kolias, Ismail Lawani, Hans Lederhuber, Sezai Leventoglu, Markus W Loffler, Janet Martin, Hassan Mashbari, Dennis Mazingi, Helen Mohan, Rachel Moore, David Moszkowicz, Joshua S Ng-Kamstra, Symeon Metallidis, Susan Moug, Milagros Niquen, Faustin Ntiren-

ganya, Oumaima Outani, Francesco Pata, Thomas D Pinkney, Peter Pockney, Dejan Radenkovic, Antonio Ramos-De la Medina, Keith Roberts, Irene Santos, Andrew Schache, Andreas Schnitzbauer, Grant D Stewart, Richard Shaw, Sebastian Shu, Kjetil Soreide, Antonino Spinelli, Sudha Sundar, Stephen Tabiri, Philip Townend, Georgios Tsoulfas, Gabrielle van Ramshorst, Raghavan Vidya, Dale Vimalachandran, Naomi Wright, EuroSurg, European Society of Coloproctology, GlobalSurg, GlobalPaedSurg, ITSurg, PTSurg, SpainSurg, S-ECCO, Joana FF Simoes (Chair).

Collaborating authors

Full list to be confirmed with submission.

COVIDSurg Collaborative[†]

[†]Collaborating authors listed at the end of this manuscript.

NIHR Global Health Research Unit on Global Surgery, Heritage Building, University of Birmingham, Mindelsohn Way, Birmingham, UK

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- 1 COVIDSurg Collaborative. Elective surgery cancellations due to the COVID-19 pandemic: global predictive modelling to inform surgical recovery plans. *Br J Surg* 2020; <https://doi.org/10.1002/bjs.11746> [Epub ahead of print].
- 2 COVIDSurg Collaborative. Mortality and pulmonary complications in patients undergoing surgery with perioperative SARS-CoV-2 infection: an international cohort. *Lancet* 2020; **396**: 27–38.

Supporting information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.