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HCV reinfection after HCV therapy among HIV/HCV co-infected individuals in Europe

S. Amele^{1*}, AK. Sandri^{2*}, A. Rodger¹, L. Vandekerckhove³, T. Benfield⁴, A. Milinkovic⁵, C. Duvivier⁶, H. Stellbrink⁷, H. Sambatakou⁸, N. Chkhartishvili⁹, L. Caldeira¹⁰, M. Laguno¹¹, P. Domingo¹², G. Wandeler¹³, M. Gisinger¹⁴, E. Kuzovatova¹⁵, G. Dragovic¹⁶, B. Knysz¹⁷, R. Matulionyte¹⁸, JK. Rockstroh¹⁹, JD. Lundgren², A. Mocroft^{1,2} and L. Peters² on behalf of the EuroSIDA study group

* Authors share first author position

¹Centre for Clinical Research, Epidemiology, Modelling and Evaluation, Institute for Global Health, University College London, London, UK. ²CHIP, Rigshospitalet, Copenhagen, Denmark. ³Ghent University Hospital, Ghent, Belgium. ⁴Copenhagen University Hospital – Amager and Hvidovre, Hvidovre, Denmark. ⁵Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, London, UK. ⁶AP-HP - Necker Enfants malades Hospital, Infectious Diseases Department; Necker Pasteur Center for Infectious Diseases and Tropical Medicine ; Université de Paris ; IHU Imagine, Paris, France. ⁷ICH Study Center, Hamburg, Germany. ⁸Ippokration General Hospital, Athens, Greece. ⁹Infectious Diseases, AIDS & Clinical Immunology Research Center, Tbilisi, Georgia. ¹⁰Santa Maria University Hospital, University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal. ¹¹Infectious Diseases Service, Hospital Clinic, Barcelona, Spain. ¹²Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau, Barcelona, Spain. ¹³Department of Infectious Diseases, Bern University Hospital, University of Bern, Bern, Switzerland. ¹⁴Medical University of Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Austria. ¹⁵Nizhny Novgorod Scientific and Research Institute, Nizhny Novgorod, Russia. ¹⁶Department of Pharmacology, Clinical Pharmacology and Toxicology, School of Medicine, University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia. ¹⁷Wroclaw Medical University, Wroclaw, Poland. ¹⁸Department of Infectious Diseases and Dermatovenereology, Faculty of Medicine, Vilnius University; Vilnius University Hospital Santaros Klinikos, Vilnius, Lithuania. ¹⁹Universitäts Klinik Bonn, Germany

Corresponding author: Lars Peters, CHIP, Rigshospitalet, University of

Copenhagen, Blegdamsvej 9, 2100 Copenhagen, Denmark. Tel: +4535455764; fax: +4535455758; e-mail: lars.peters@regionh.dk.

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Abstract

Background

While direct acting antivirals (DAA) can clear HCV in nearly all HIV/HCV coinfecting individuals, high rates of reinfection may hamper efforts to eliminate HCV in this population. We investigated reinfection after sustained virologic response (SVR) in HIV/HCV coinfecting individuals in Europe.

Methods

Factors associated with odds of reinfection by two years after SVR in EuroSIDA participants with ≥ 1 HCV-RNA test and 2 years follow-up were assessed using logistic regression.

Results

Overall, 1,022 individuals were included. The median age was 50 (IQR 43-54 years), and most were male (78%), injection drug users (52%), and received interferon (IFN)-free DAA (62%). By 24 months, 75 (7.3%, 95% confidence interval [CI] 5.7%-8.9%) individuals were reinfected. Among individuals treated prior to 2014, 16.1% were reinfected compared with 4.2% and 8.3% among those treated ≥ 2014 with IFN-free and IFN-based therapy, respectively. After adjustment, individuals who had started treatment ≥ 2014 with IFN-free or IFN-based therapy had significantly lower odds of reinfection (adjusted odds ratio 0.21, 95% CI: 0.11-0.38 and 0.43, 95% CI: 0.22-0.83) compared with those who had received therapy < 2014 . There were no significant differences in odds of reinfection according to age, gender, European region, HIV transmission risk group or liver fibrosis.

Conclusions

Among HIV/HCV coinfecting individuals in Europe, 7.3% were HCV reinfected within 24 months of achieving SVR, with evidence suggesting this is decreasing over time and with use of newer HCV regimens. Harm reduction to reduce reinfection and surveillance to detect early reinfection with an offer of treatment is essential to eliminate HCV.

Introduction

While treatment with direct-acting antivirals (DAA) can cure hepatitis C virus infection in more than 95% of those treated [1], high rates of HCV reinfection could hamper efforts to achieve the WHO goals of eliminating HCV infection as public health risk by 2030 [2].

In the era of interferon (IFN)-based HCV therapy, high risk of HCV reinfection has been described among HIV/HCV coinfecting individuals. A meta-analysis found that HIV/HCV coinfecting individuals had a 15% risk of reinfection after achieving sustained virological response (SVR) with pegylated interferon and ribavirin, with those treated outside randomized clinical trials being at particular high risk of reinfection [3].

In the era of DAA therapy, real-life studies of HCV reinfection among HIV positive persons have primarily come from cohorts in Western Europe [4, 5], Australia [6] and Canada [7]. In Europe, high rates of HCV reinfection have been observed among HIV positive MSM in studies from Spain [5] with 5.93 reinfections per 100 person-years of follow up (95% confidence interval 3.37-10.44) and Germany [4] 9.02 (6.48-12.26). In the same studies the reinfection rates among injecting drug users (IDUs) were only 0.21 (0.09-0.52) and 1.14 (0.56-2.09), respectively. There is a lack of data on HCV reinfection from more heterogeneous European HIV positive populations including patients followed in clinics in Eastern Europe.

In this analysis we aimed to evaluate the two-year prevalence of HCV reinfection after IFN-based or IFN-free DAA HCV therapy among HIV/HCV coinfecting individuals from the pan-European EuroSIDA cohort study.

Methods

Study design and participants

Participants were recruited from the EuroSIDA study, a large prospective observational cohort study of HIV-infected individuals, that has enrolled around 23,000 HIV-1 infected individuals from around 100 clinics across 35 countries across all regions of Europe as well as Israel and Argentina.

The EuroSIDA study has been described in detail elsewhere [8]. Standardised data including information on demographics, HIV-related factors, antiretroviral therapy (ART), coinfections, comorbidities and routine biochemistry are collected at enrolment and, thereafter, once annually. Detailed information is collected on HCV serology, virology, liver fibrosis and HCV treatment including individual drugs and start and stop dates of treatment [9].

Eligible for this analysis were those who had achieved an SVR after IFN-based or IFN-free HCV therapy during prospective follow-up, and had at least 24 months of follow up after SVR and at least one HCV-RNA result during that period. Where individuals had more than one treatment episode during follow-up, the first episode with SVR was used.

Outcomes and definitions

The primary outcome of interest was HCV reinfection during the 24-month follow up period following SVR. SVR was defined as undetectable HCV-RNA 12 weeks or 24 weeks after HCV treatment course completion for IFN-free and IFN-based therapy, respectively. HCV reinfection was defined as any positive HCV-RNA or genotype result or initiation of HCV therapy within this 24-month follow up period. Baseline was defined as the date of SVR.

Liver fibrosis was defined according to the definitions previously used in the EuroSIDA study based on liver biopsy and Fibroscan® test results, aspartate transaminase to platelet ratio (APRI), or plasma hyaluronic acid. Fibrosis stage was defined based on the most recent fibrosis marker measured before the baseline. Advanced fibrosis (METAVIR \geq F3) was defined as either \geq F3 on liver biopsy, Fibroscan \geq 9 kPa, APRI $>$ 1.5 or hyaluronic acid $>$ 160 ng/mL. Where $>$ 1 marker was measured priority was given to biopsy, Fibroscan, APRI followed by hyaluronic acid [10].

Statistical methods

Characteristics of included participants at baseline were described and compared between those with or without reinfection during follow up, using chi-squared tests for categorical variables and Kruskal-Wallis tests for continuous variables.

Logistic regression was used to determine the odds of being HCV reinfected. Variables that were significant in univariable analysis ($p<0.1$) were adjusted for in the multivariable model and including year of treatment/HCV regimen (categorised as <2014 ; ≥ 2014 /IFN-free DAA; ≥ 2014 /IFN +/- DAA) and region of Europe *a priori*. Analyses were performed using SAS (Statistical Analysis Software, version 9.4, Cary NC, US)

Results

Among 23,005 HIV-1 infected persons in EuroSIDA, 9,276 were HCV-Ab positive and 6,915 (74.5%) were ever HCV-RNA positive. Among these, 2,625 (38.0%) had achieved SVR after EuroSIDA enrolment and 1,579 (60.2%) had at least 24 months of follow up after SVR and among these, 1,022 (64.7%) had been tested for HCV-

RNA at least once within 24 months of achieving SVR and were included in this study. Compared with those included, excluded individuals were younger, less likely to be male, to have a later baseline, and more likely to be from Central East or Eastern Europe and less likely to be from Central or Northern Europe compared to Southern Europe. Excluded participants were also more likely to have \leq F3 liver fibrosis. There were no differences between the groups in terms of HIV related factors.

Among the 1,022 included individuals, the majority were male (78%), white (86%), with a median age of 50 years (interquartile range [IQR]: 43-54) and 52% reported IDU as the mode of HIV infection; 146 (14%) were enrolled from the East/Central-East regions. The median (IQR) CD4 cell count was 596 (426-818) cells/mm³ and 96% were on ART. Nineteen percent of the individuals achieved SVR before 2014, when treatment was largely interferon-based (91%), and 60% achieved SVR at/after 2014 with an interferon-free DAA-based regimen. Thirty percent had advanced liver fibrosis (METAVIR stage F3-F4).

During two years of follow up, 75 (7.3%, 95% confidence interval [CI] 5.7%-8.9%) individuals were reinfected. Table 1 compares the characteristics of the three groups categorized according to treatment year and HCV treatment regimen (individuals treated <2014; treatment \geq 2014/IFN-free DAA; treatment \geq 2014/IFN +/- DAA). The reinfection rate was highest among those treated before 2014 (16.1%) vs. \geq 2014 with IFN-free DAAs (4.2%) or with IFN +/- DAA (8.3%; $p < 0.0001$). The characteristics of the three groups differed significantly except for gender. Of note, among those treated prior to 2014, 58% had IDU as HIV transmission risk, while 22% were MSM. Among those treated \geq 2014, the proportion of IDU decreased significantly, while the proportion of MSM increased, compared with individuals treated prior to 2014.

Those with a baseline of \geq 2014 and treated with DAA had the highest median number of HCV-RNA measurements during the 2 year FU (3 tests, IQR 2-3) compared to those treated before 2014 (2 tests, IQR 2-3) or those treated with IFN \geq 2014 (2 tests, IQR 2-3, $p = 0.0020$). The median (IQR) number of HCV-RNA tests during the 2 year FU period following SVR was highest (4 tests, IQR 2-7) in those reinfected than among those not reinfected (2 tests, IQR 2-3; $p < 0.0001$). The median time to reinfection was 8 months (IQR 2 - 19) overall, and was similar across the three treatment groups ($p = 0.57$; baseline <2014, baseline \geq 2014 treated with IFN and baseline \geq 2014 treated with DAAs).

Figure 1 shows factors associated with odds of reinfection. In multivariable analysis individuals who had started treatment ≥ 2014 with IFN-free DAA therapy or IFN-based therapy (+/- DAA) had significantly lower odds of reinfection (adjusted odds ratio [aOR] 0.21, 95% CI: 0.11-0.38 and aOR 0.43, 95% CI 0.22-0.83) compared with those who had received therapy prior to 2014. No other factors were significantly associated with reinfection after adjustment. Of note, there were no significant differences in odds of reinfection when comparing injection drug users vs. MSM, or when comparing those with METAVIR F3/F4 fibrosis vs. <F3 fibrosis at baseline.

Discussion

In this analyses that included 1,022 HIV/HCV coinfecting individuals from all regions of Europe who had achieved SVR after IFN-based or IFN-free therapy, 75 (7.3%) were HCV reinfected within two years of achieving SVR.

Although those achieving SVR in 2014 or later had an almost four-fold lower odds of reinfection compared with those achieving SVR prior to 2014, we found no differences in odds of reinfection when comparing IFN-treated (+/- DAA) in 2014 or later with those who had received IFN-free DAA therapy in the same period. Hence our data do not indicate that the ease of short, well-tolerated and effective DAA therapy compared with IFN-based therapy leads to increased risk disinhibition and high rates of HCV reinfection after DAA therapy in this population. Lower odds of reinfection among those treated in recent years can possibly be explained by a lower prevalence of HCV infection in the population due to the scale up of DAA since 2014. This is supported by an Australian study showing a low risk of reinfection following unrestricted access to DAA despite ongoing risk behaviour [6], and studies from Europe that have found a decrease in the incidence of primary HCV infection among HIV infected individuals after universal access to DAA [11, 12].

Our study is one of the first to report data from Eastern Europe and Central East, regions with a high prevalence of HIV/HCV coinfecting injection drug users and low access to needle- and syringe exchange programmes and opioid substitution therapy [13]. However, there was no evidence that individuals from Central East/East Europe had increased odds of reinfection, but this was based on relatively few individuals and more studies from Eastern Europe are therefore still needed.

Although reinfection was more common among MSM than among with those with IDU as main HIV transmission risk, the difference was not statistically significant after adjusting for other risk factors. This is in contrast to studies from Germany [4] and

Spain [5], that found much higher reinfection rates among DAA treated MSM than in IDU. Unfortunately, in EuroSIDA we do not know if the IDU are currently injecting. In Spain and Germany drug users have access to comprehensive preventive measures against blood borne infections, whereas coverage varies across other European countries [13] and a direct comparison with the IDU population from our study is not possible.

Although all individuals considered for inclusion in this study were under active follow up for their HIV infection, around a third had no documented HCV-RNA result in the first two years after SVR and were therefore not included in the study. Lack of HCV-RNA testing after SVR means many reinfections may go unnoticed with risk of fibrosis progression for the individuals and onward transmission to others. We also found that individuals who were reinfected had a higher median HCV-RNA tests during the 2 year follow up period than those who were not reinfected (4 vs. 2 tests). It is possible that individuals considered to have symptoms and/or ongoing risk-behaviour were preferentially targeted for HCV-RNA testing and that the study therefore overestimates the rate of reinfection.

The strengths of this study is the inclusion of a large diverse population from across Europe and that all persons were followed for at least 2 years to observe reinfection. In addition to missing HCV-RNA testing after SVR described above, other limitations include lack of information about ongoing transmission risk behaviour and access to preventive measures such as needle-exchange programs and opioid substitution therapy. Since viral sequencing is not collected in EuroSIDA, we were unable to definitively differentiate reinfections from late relapses. However, since relapses later than 12 and 24 weeks after end of INF-free and IFN-based therapy are relatively uncommon [14, 15], this limitation is not likely to influence the conclusions of our study significantly.

In conclusion, this study of 1,022 HIV/HCV coinfecting persons from all regions of Europe, found that the HCV reinfection rate in the first two years after SVR was 7.3%, but with lower odds of reinfection among those treated in recent years or using IFN-free DAA therapy. More studies of HCV reinfection among HIV co-infected individuals, followed up for longer time are warranted.

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213 **Author Contribution Statement**

214 SA, AKS, AMO and LP conceived the study, designed the analyses and interpreted
215 the findings. SA, AKS and AMO performed the statistical analyses. SA and AKS wrote
216 the first manuscript draft. AM and LP reviewed and commented on the first and
217 subsequent drafts. AR, LV, TB, AMI, CD, HST, HSA, NC, LC, ML, PD, GW, MG, EK,
218 GD, BK, RM and JKR contributed data to the study. AR, LV, TB, AMI, CD, HST, HSA,
219 NC, LC, ML, PD, GW, MG, EK, GD, BK, RM, JKR and JDL reviewed and commented on
220 the final draft of the manuscript and were involved in the interpretation of findings.

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223 **Conflicts of interest**

224 Thomas Benfield reports grants from Novo Nordisk Foundation, grants from
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The EuroSIDA study group

The multi-center study group, EuroSIDA (national coordinators in parenthesis).

Albania: (A Harxhi), University Hospital Center of Tirana, Tirana. **Argentina:** (M Losso), M Kundro, Hospital JM Ramos Mejia, Buenos Aires. **Austria:** (B Schmied), Otto Wagner Hospital, Vienna; R Zangerle, Medical University Innsbruck, Innsbruck. **Belarus:** (I Karpov), A Vassilenko, Belarus State Medical University, Minsk, VM Mitsura, Gomel State Medical University, Gomel; D Paduto, Regional AIDS Centre, Svetlogorsk. **Belgium:** (N Clumeck), S De Wit, M Delforge, SaintPierre Hospital, Brussels; E Florence, Institute of Tropical Medicine, Antwerp; L Vandekerckhove, University Ziekenhuis Gent, Gent. **Bosnia-Herzegovina:** (V Hadziosmanovic), Klinicki Centar Univerziteta Sarajevo, Sarajevo. **Croatia:** (J Begovac), University Hospital of Infectious Diseases, Zagreb. **Czech Republic:** (L Machala), D Jilich, Faculty Hospital Bulovka, Prague; D Sedlacek, Charles University Hospital, Plzen. **Denmark:** G Kronborg, T Benfield, Hvidovre Hospital, Copenhagen; J Gerstoft, T Katzenstein, Rigshospitalet, Copenhagen; C Pedersen, IS Johansen, Odense University Hospital, Odense; L Ostergaard, Skejby Hospital, Aarhus, L Wiese, NF Moller, Sjællands Universitetshospital, Roskilde; L N Nielsen, Hillerød Hospital, Hillerød. **Estonia:** (K Zilmer), West-Tallinn Central Hospital, Tallinn; Jelena Smidt, Nakkusosakond Siseklinik, Kohtla-Järve. Finland: (I Aho), Helsinki University Hospital, Helsinki. **France:** (J-P Viard), Hôtel-Dieu, Paris; P-M Girard, Hospital Saint-Antoine, Paris; C Pradier, E Fontas, Hôpital de l'Archet, Nice; C Duvivier, Hôpital Necker-Enfants Malades, Paris. **Germany:** (J Rockstroh), Universitäts Klinik Bonn; G Behrens, Medizinische Hochschule Hannover; O Degen, University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf, Infectious Diseases Unit, Hamburg; HJ Stellbrink, IPM Study Center, Hamburg; C Stefan, JW Goethe University Hospital, Frankfurt; J Bogner, Medizinische Poliklinik, Munich; G. Fätkenheuer, Universität Köln, Cologne. **Georgia:** (N Chkhartishvili) Infectious Diseases, AIDS & Clinical Immunology Research Center, Tbilisi. **Greece:** (H Sambatakou), Ippokration General Hospital, Athens; G Adamis, N Paissios, Athens General Hospital "G Gennimatas", Athens. **Hungary:** (J Szilávik), South-Pest Hospital Centre–National Institute for Infectology and Haematology, Budapest. **Iceland:** (M Gottfredsson), Landspítali University Hospital, Reykjavik. **Ireland:** (E Devitt), St. James's Hospital, Dublin. **Israel:** (L Tau), D Turner, M Burke, Ichilov Hospital, Tel Aviv; E Shahrar, G Hassoun, Rambam Medical Center, Haifa; H Elinav, M Haouzi, Hadassah University Hospital, Jerusalem; D Elbirt, AIDS Center (Neve Or), Jerusalem. **Italy:** (A D'Arminio Monforte), Istituto Di Clinica Malattie Infettive e Tropicale, Milan; R Esposito, I Mazeu, C Mussini, Università Modena, Modena; F Mazzotta, A Gabbuti, Ospedale S Maria Annunziata, Firenze; A Lazzarin, A Castagna, N Gianotti, Ospedale San Raffaele, Milan; M Galli, A Ridolfo, Osp. L. Sacco, Milan. **Lithuania:** (V Uzdaviniene) Vilnius University Hospital Santaros Klinikos, Vilnius; R Matulionyte, Centro

poliklinika, Vilnius, Vilnius University Hospital Santaros Klinikos, Vilnius.

Luxembourg: (T Staub), R Hemmer, Centre Hospitalier, Luxembourg.

Montenegro: (S Dragas), M Stevanovic, Clinical Center of Montenegro, Podgorica.

Netherlands: (P Reiss), Academisch Medisch Centrum bij de Universiteit van Amsterdam, Amsterdam. **North Macedonia** (J Trajanovska), University Clinic for Infectious Diseases & Febrile Conditions, Mother Teresa 17, Skopje. **Norway:** (DH Reikvam), A Maeland, J Bruun, Oslo University Hospital, Ullevaal. **Poland:** (B Knysz), J Gasiowski, M Inglot, Medical University, Wroclaw; E Bakowska, Centrum Diagnostyki i Terapii AIDS, Warsaw; R Flisiak, A Grzeszczuk, Medical University, Bialystok; M Parczewski, K Maciejewska, B Aksak-Was, Medical University, Szczecin; M Beniowski, E Mularska, Osrodek Diagnostyki i Terapii AIDS, Chorzow; E Jablonowska, J Kamerys, K Wojcik, Wojewodzki Szpital Specjalistyczny, Lodz; I Mozer-Lisewska, B Rozplochowski, Poznan University of Medical Sciences, Poznan.

Portugal: (A Zagalo), Hospital Santa Maria, Lisbon; K Mansinho, Hospital de Egas Moniz, Lisbon; F Maltez, Hospital Curry Cabral, Lisbon. **Romania:** (R Radoi), C Oprea, Carol Davila University of Medicine and Pharmacy Bucharest, Victor Babes Clinical Hospital for Infectious and Tropical Diseases, Bucharest. **Russia:** A

Yakovlev, Medical Academy Botkin Hospital, St Petersburg; T Trofimova, Novgorod Centre for AIDS, Novgorod, I Khromova, Centre for HIV/AIDS & Infectious Diseases, Kaliningrad; E Kuzovatova, Nizhny Novgorod Scientific and Research Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology named after Academician I.N. Blokhina, Nizhny Novgorod; E Borodulina, E Vdoushkina, Samara State Medical University, Samara. **Serbia:** (J Ranin), The Institute for Infectious and Tropical Diseases, Belgrade. **Slovenia:** (J Tomazic), University Clinical Centre Ljubljana, Ljubljana.

Spain: (JM Miro), JM Miró, M. Laguno, E. Martinez, F. Garcia, JL Blanco, M. Martinez-Rebollar, J. Mallolas, P Callau, J Rojas, A Inciarta, Hospital Clinic-IDIBAPS University of Barcelona, Barcelona; S Moreno, S. del Campo, Hospital Ramon y Cajal, Madrid; B Clotet, A Jou, R Paredes, J Puig, JM Llibre, JR Santos, Infectious Diseases Unit & IrsiCaixa AIDS Research Institute, Hospital Germans Trias i Pujol, Badalona; P Domingo, M Gutierrez, G Mateo, MA Sambeat, Hospital Sant Pau, Barcelona; JM Laporte, Hospital Universitario de Alava, Vitoria. **Sweden:** (K Falconer), A Thalme, A Sonnerborg, Karolinska University Hospital, Stockholm; J Brannstrom, Venhälsan-Sodersjukhuset, Stockholm; L Flamholc, Malmö University Hospital, Malmö. **Switzerland:** (A Scherrer), R Weber, University Hospital Zurich; M Cavassini, University Hospital Lausanne; A Calmy, University Hospital Geneva; H Furrer, University Hospital Bern; M Battegay, University Hospital Basel; P Schmid, Cantonal Hospital St. Gallen. **Ukraine:** A Kuznetsova, Kharkov State Medical University, Kharkov; J Mikhalik, Crimean Republican AIDS centre, Simferopol; M Sluzhynska, Lviv Regional HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control CTR, Lviv. **United Kingdom:** A Milinkovic, St. Stephen's Clinic, Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, London; AM Johnson, E Simons, S Edwards, Mortimer Market Centre, London; A Phillips, MA Johnson, A Mocroft, Royal Free and University College Medical School, London (Royal Free Campus); C Orkin, Royal London Hospital, London; A Winston, Imperial College School of Medicine at St. Mary's, London; A Clarke, Royal Sussex County Hospital, Brighton; C Leen, Western General Hospital, Edinburgh.

The following centers have previously contributed data to EuroSIDA: Medical University, Gdansk, Poland Infectious Diseases Hospital, Sofia, Bulgaria Hôpital de la Croix Rousse, Lyon, France Hôpital de la Pitié-Salpêtrière, Paris, France Unité INSERM, Bordeaux, France Hôpital Edouard Herriot, Lyon, France Bernhard Nocht Institut für Tropenmedizin, Hamburg, Germany 1st I.K.A Hospital of Athens, Athens, Greece Ospedale Riuniti, Divisione Malattie Infettive, Bergamo, Italy Ospedale di Bolzano, Divisione Malattie Infettive, Bolzano, Italy Ospedale Cotugno, III Divisione Malattie Infettive, Napoli, Italy Dérier Hospital, Bratislava, Slovakia Hospital Carlos III, Departamento de Enfermedades Infecciosas, Madrid, Spain Kiev

Centre for AIDS, Kiev, Ukraine Luhansk State Medical University, Luhansk, Ukraine
Odessa Region AIDS Center, Odessa, Ukraine St Petersburg AIDS Centre, St
Peterburg, Russia Infectology Centre of Latvia, Riga, Latvia University di Roma la
Sapienza, Rome, Italy Istituto Nazionale Malattie Infettive Lazzaro Spallanzani,
Rome, Italy

EuroSIDA Steering Committee: I Karpov, M Losso, J Lundgren, J Rockstroh, I
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Matulionyte, C Oprea, JD Kowalska, J Begovac, JM Miró, G Guaraldi, R Paredes
Chair: G Wandeler Co-Chair: R Paredes

Study lead: L Peters

Coordinating Centre Staff: O Kirk, L Peters, A Bojesen, D Raben, EV Hansen, D
Kristensen, JF Larsen, AH Fischer

Statistical Staff: A Mocroft, A Phillips, A Cozzi-Lepri, S Amele, A Pelchen-
Matthews, A Roen, E Tusch, W Bannister, J Reekie

FIGURE LEGEND

The figure shows the odds the adjusted odds ratio of HCV reinfection within 24
months of achieving sustained virological response with either direct-acting
antivirals or interferon-based therapy.

Abbreviations: DAA, direct-acting antivirals; IFN, interferon; MSM, men who have
sex with men; IDU, injecting drug use;

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