

Press release

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COVID-19 Study with new approach:

CORON-ACT-Study

A multi-centre study initiated by the Department of RIA at the Inselspital, Bern University Hospital is investigating the effect of Tocilizumab on hospitalised COVID-19 patients. In COVID-19 therapy, there is an urgent need for a drug that can halt or completely prevent the dramatic deterioration in condition that often occurs after a viral infection. Tocilizumab is a suitable candidate for this application. The drug has been known and used for years, e.g. for rheumatoid arthritis.

At the beginning of 2020, when the COVID-19 case numbers skyrocketed worldwide, a feverish search for suitable therapeutic measures began. A group of researchers led by the Bernese Prof. Peter Villiger, MD, Clinical Director and Chief Physician of the University Clinic for Rheumatology, Immunology and Allergology at the Inselspital, Bern started the CORON-ACT study, a multicentre, double-blind, randomised, controlled phase II study on the efficacy and safety of Tocilizumab. The active ingredient is marketed by Roche under the name Actemra and has been used for years for the treatment of polyarthritis (rheumatoid arthritis) and giant cell arteritis.

Therapeutic approach

While most strategies initially focused on combating SARS-CoV-2, it became clear early on that the often observed, dramatic deterioration in the health status after an initial flu-like phase was still unclear. It was important to find out what caused this deterioration and what measures could be taken to counteract it. A strategy of immune modulation was chosen. Tocilizumab was chosen as a representative from the group of monoclonal antibodies, well known from years of application in rheumatology and immunology in terms of performance and tolerance. Villiger's concern is to test the first indications in a scientifically sound study: *"From Wuhan and Italy, results of case series are available that suggest a positive effect. Now it is a matter of providing scientific proof in a state-of-the-art study with CORON-ACT"*.

Coordinated effort

Within a very short time, Peter Villiger and his team succeeded in winning over researchers at the CHUV in Lausanne (responsible: Dr. Lloïc Lhopitallier, Infectiology), at Zurich University Hospital (responsible: PD Dr. Dominique Braun, Infectiology)

and at the Cantonal Hospital Ticino in Lugano (responsible: Dr. Gianluca Vanini, head Department of Immunology and Allergology) for the multicentre approach. The study has received a great deal of attention both from the authorities at the Federal Office of Public Health and from the private sector. Deputy head of department of infectiology, Loïc Lhopitallier, said: *"I am confident about the efficacy of Tocilizumab and hope that the study will be conducted quickly. The centres are well chosen. They give us a supra-regional view of the problem"*.

Outlook

The study is designed in such a way that a statistical analysis is performed after every 10 patient inclusions. As soon as clear evidence for (or against) the efficacy of Tocilizumab can be demonstrated, the study will be terminated. Inclusion criteria are age between 30 and 80 years, whereby 30 to 59 year-olds are only included if they have risk factors; from 60 years onwards, all patients qualify if the disease suddenly worsens. The first 5 patients have already been recruited. Further test persons, up to a maximum of 100 persons, will now be included. Gianluca Vanini at the Cantonal Hospital in Lugano states: *"We are glad that the initially very dramatic situation has now calmed down somewhat. At the same time, we are keen to have additional funds on hand in case SARS-CoV-2 spreads again. Tocilizumab appears to be an excellent candidate."*

The researchers agree that thanks to the joint effort of Bern, Lausanne, Zurich and Lugano, the precarious situation of last March and April should not happen again.

Expert:

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Insel Gruppe

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