

EULAR releases first reports on arthritis and COVID-19 in Italy

3 April, 2020, Kilchberg, Switzerland – The Annals of the Rheumatic Diseases, the journal of the European League Against Rheumatism, EULAR, has published two letters this week containing findings from COVID-19 cases concerning those suffering from rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases in Italy.

The two letters examine the risk of patients with rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases (RMDs) who are on immunosuppressive therapies: ‘Are my patients with rheumatic diseases at higher risk of COVID-19?’ and ‘Clinical course of COVID-19 in a series of patients with chronic arthritis treated with immunosuppressive targeted therapies’. The second letter provides one of the first reports available regarding current RMD cases around the epidemic in Italy.

The EULAR Journal, The Annals of the Rheumatic Diseases, publishes the letters this week, following the publication of a letter addressing the hope and threats of antimalarial therapies during the COVID-19 epidemic: ‘To Consider or not: anti-malarials as a prophylactic intervention in the COVID-19 pandemic’.

Lombardy is the region in Northern Italy with the highest incidence of COVID-19 cases, with more than 33,000 confirmed patients at the time of the letter composition, and 1,250 requiring admission to the intensive care unit within one month. Since the first reports of COVID-19 cases in Italy, a survey with a 2-week follow-up contact has been issued to patients with chronic arthritis treated with biologic disease modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (bDMARDs) or targeted synthetic DMARDs (tsDMARDs). The patients were then followed at their biologic outpatient clinic in Pavia, Lombardy.

EULAR President-Elect, Professor Annamaria Iagnocco, highlights key issues here:

“Due to the extent of the COVID-19 situation in Italy, EULAR welcomes this set of findings; they do not present any conclusions on the incidence rate of the COVID-19 infection in patients with rheumatic diseases, nor on the outcome, overall, of immunocompromised patients affected by COVID-19.

“A high level of vigilance and strict follow-up must be maintained with these patients, including the exclusion of superimposed infections. Our preliminary experience shows, however, that patients with chronic arthritis treated with bDMARDs or tsDMARDs do not seem to be at increased risk of respiratory- or life- threatening complications from COVID-19 compared with the general population.”

In light of their in-vitro effect and early clinical results, anti-malarial drugs CQ and HCQ have been proposed to patients with COVID-19 – related pneumonia and are now included in the Chinese guidelines for the management of COVID-19.

At this stage, EULAR calls for a balanced approach to ensure that we meet the ongoing pandemic imperatives but equally respects the needs of those also benefiting already from the use of this medicine; for some of whom this is an essential medication. EULAR welcomes the global efforts aimed at increasing the information base around the potential for HCQ/CQ in the treatment of COVID-19 to ensure that its application is as appropriate and evidence based as possible in these challenging circumstances and to thereby offer the maximum benefit possible.

About EULAR

The European League against Rheumatism (EULAR) is the European umbrella organisation representing scientific societies, health professional associations and organisations for people with RMDs. EULAR aims to reduce the burden of RMDs on individuals and society and to improve the treatment, prevention and rehabilitation of RMDs. To this end, EULAR fosters excellence in education and research in the field of rheumatology. It promotes the translation of research advances into daily care and fights for the recognition of the needs of people with RMDs by the EU institutions through advocacy action.

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Notes to Editors

EULAR has released guidance for patients in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak. The guidance addresses typical questions that patients with RMDs have and recommends protective measures both for patients and the health care workforce. More information and a video can be found here: https://www.eular.org/policy_statement_on_covid_19.cfm