CSF analysis in post-COVID-19 is not suggestive of persistent CNS infection

Running head: Anti-SARS-CoV-2 specific CSF antibody index in post-COVID-19

Finja Schweitzer, PhD[1*], Yasemin Goereci, MD[1*], Christiana Franke, MD[2], Steffi Silling, PhD[3], Fabian Bösl, MD[2], Franziska Maier, PhD[4], Eva Heger, PhD[3], Birgit Deiman, PhD[5], Harald Prüss, MD[2,6], Oezguer A. Onur, MD[1,7], Florian Klein, MD[3,8,9], Gereon Fink, MD[1,7], Veronica Di Cristanziano, MD[3**], Clemens Warnke, MD[1**]

*/** Authors contributed equally

1: Department of Neurology, Faculty of Medicine and University Hospital Cologne, University of Cologne, Cologne

2: Department of Neurology with Experimental Neurology, Charité-Universitätsmedizin Berlin, Corporate Member of Freie Universität Berlin, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, and Berlin Institute of Health, Berlin, Germany

3: Institute of Virology, Faculty of Medicine and University Hospital Cologne, University of Cologne, Cologne, Germany

4: Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine and University Hospital Cologne, University of Cologne, Cologne

5: Clinical Laboratory, Catharina Hospital Eindhoven, Eindhoven, The Netherlands; Institute for Complex Molecular Systems and Department of Biomedical Engineering, Laboratory of Chemical Biology, Eindhoven University of Technology, Eindhoven, The Netherlands; Expert Center Clinical Chemistry Eindhoven, Eindhoven, The Netherlands

6: German Center for Neurodegenerative Diseases (DZNE) Berlin, Berlin, Germany

7: Cognitive Neuroscience, Institute of Neuroscience and Medicine (INM-3), Research Centre Jülich, Jülich, Germany

8: German Center for Infection Research, Partner Site Bonn-Cologne, 50931 Cologne, Germany

9: Center for Molecular Medicine Cologne (CMMC), University of Cologne, 50931 Cologne, Germany

Corresponding author:

Clemens Warnke, Department of Neurology, Faculty of Medicine and University Hospital Cologne, University of Cologne,

Kerpener Str. 62, 50937 Cologne, Germany. E-mail: clemens.warnke@uk-koeln.de

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To assess if SARS-CoV-2 causes a persistent central nervous system infection.

Methods: SARS-CoV-2 specific antibody index and SARS-CoV-2 RNA studied in cerebrospinal fluid following COVID-19.

Results: Cerebrospinal fluid was assessed between day 1-30 (n=12), between day 31-90 (n=8), or later than 90 days (post-COVID-19, n=20) of COVID-19 diagnosis. SARS-CoV-2 RNA was absent in all patients, and in none of the 20 patients with post-COVID-19 syndrome intrathecally produced anti-SARS-CoV-2 antibodies were detected.

Interpretation: The absence of evidence of SARS-CoV-2 in cerebrospinal fluid argues against a persistent central nervous system infection as a cause of neurological or neuropsychiatric post-COVID-19 syndrome.

INTRODUCTION

Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) infection primarily targets the upper and lower respiratory tract, causing dry cough and fever. Neurological and neuropsychiatric manifestations have been associated with coronavirus disease 19 (COVID-19), ranging from mild to fatal at all disease stages irrespective of disease severity[1-2]. Interestingly, immunofluorescence and PCR analyses of intestinal biopsies obtained from asymptomatic individuals at four months after the onset of COVID-19 revealed persistent detection of SARS-CoV-2 RNA and specific immunoreactivity in the small bowel in 50% of individuals[3]. It appears reasonable to assume that SARS-CoV-2 may also reach the CNS via several routes, including the transcribial, hematogenous, and lymphatic routes, or via axonal transport or trans-synaptic transfer[4]. Histopathology data revealing viral RNA transcripts and particles by transmission electron microscopy in brain tissue may suggest CNS infection[5]. Therefore, symptoms such as cognitive impairment or fatigue persisting for more than 90 days (post-COVID-19) following acute respiratory COVID-19 might be caused by SARS-CoV-2 persistence in the CNS.

Systematic studies of SARS-CoV-2 RNA detection in cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) from patients with neurological symptoms early during COVID-19 and in patients with post-COVID-19 may help address the question of an acute and/or persistent CNS infection with SARS-CoV-2. SARS-CoV-2 RNA was infrequently detected in the CSF in single cases and case series[6-10], with all these cases reported within the first 90 days of the respiratory infection.

In addition to molecular assays, the SARS-CoV-2-specific CSF antibody index ($AI_{SARS\text{-}CoV\text{-}2}$) allows calculation of an intrathecally produced antibody fraction and might provide indirect evidence of CNS infection. The AI is in clinical use for chronic CNS infections such as herpes virus encephalitis, subacute sclerosing

panencephalitis, neuroborreliosis[11], and is under investigation for progressive multifocal leukoencephalopathy[12].

This study aimed to clarify if SARS-CoV-2 persistently infects the CNS, with SARS-CoV-2 RNA from CSF and the $AI_{SARS\text{-}CoV\text{-}2}$ as outcome measures.

METHODS

Participants

The data and biomaterial derived from a prospective cohort study at baseline, collected at two tertiary university hospitals in Germany (Cologne/Berlin) between April 2020 and April 2021 from patients hospitalized or presenting at the specialized post-COVID-19 outpatient clinic. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Cologne (20–1501) and Berlin (EA2/066/20) and registered in the German Clinical Trials Register (DRKS00024434). Patients between 18 and 99 years of age and with neurological or neuropsychiatric symptoms during or after PCR-confirmed COVID-19 were eligible for the study following written informed consent.

Detection of SARS-CoV-2 RNA in CSF

Viral nucleic acids were extracted from CSF and serum samples (200µL) using the innuPREP Virus DNA/RNA Kit-IPC16 and the automated platform InnoPure C16 touch (20µL eluate volume) (Analytik Jena, Jena, Germany). To assess SARS-CoV-2 (N and E gene) RNA RT-PCR cycle threshold (Ct) levels, samples were analyzed using the LightMix® SarbeccoV *E*-gene plus EAV control (TIB Molbiol, Berlin, Germany) and *N*-gene (inhouse primer sets in multiplex PCR) as previously described[13]. Assays were carried out on LightCycler® 480 (Roche Diagnostics, Mannheim, Germany). Samples with a weak signal in the RT-PCR assay were reanalyzed using a one-step RT-ddPCR multiplex assay targeting SARS-CoV-2 E, RdRp and N with a limit of detection of 5 viral RNA copies per reaction as previously described[14], and two additional commercial tests. The Xpert® Xpress SARS-CoV-2 (Cepheid, Sunnyvale, CA, USA) with a limit of detection of 0.005 PFU/mL for N gene and 0.02 PFU/mL for E gene, and the Cobas® SARS-CoV-2 assay on the automated

Cobas® 6800 (Roche Diagnostics) with a limit of detection of 0.0063 TCID50/mL for SARS-CoV-2 ORF1a/b and 0.0082 TCID50/mL for E gene.

Assessment of SARS-CoV-2 specific antibody index

To determine the $AI_{SARS\text{-}CoV\text{-}2}$, SARS-CoV-2 immunoglobulin class G (IgG) was quantified in diluted CSF and serum samples using the Anti-SARS-CoV-2 QuantiVac ELISA (IgG) targeting the S1 domain of the spike protein (Euroimmun Diagnostik, Lübeck, Germany). Results were expressed semi-quantitative as the ratio of extinction probe and extinction calibrator. CSF samples were generally diluted at 1:2; if antibody concentration exceeded the standards provided, additional 1:20, 1:40, or 1:80 dilutions were required. Serum samples were diluted at 1:101, 1:404, and 1:1010; a few samples required further 1:2020 and 1:4040 dilutions. $AI_{SARS\text{-}CoV\text{-}2}$ was calculated based on SARS-CoV-2 IgG in serum and CSF and albumin and total IgG to estimate specific intrathecal antibody synthesis as previously described[11]. According to the manufacturer's recommendations, serum SARS-CoV-2 specific IgG values were chosen for calculations for which the optical density (OD) was closest to 1 and closest to the OD detected for the corresponding CSF sample.

RESULTS

Characteristics of study participants

We analyzed 40 patients after PCR-confirmed SARS-CoV-2 infection treated for neuropsychiatric manifestations of COVID-19, and a matching CSF-serum pair available (figure 1). CSF was assessed between day 1-30 (acute COVID-19, n=12), between day 31-90 (ongoing COVID-19, n=8), or later than 90 days (post-COVID-19, n=20) of the COVID-19 diagnosis. Patients in the acute-COVID-19 group were older ($p<.001$), and the frequency with a severe or critical COVID-19 disease course was higher as compared to during ongoing- and post-COVID-19 (10 of 12, 83.3% vs. 7 of 28, 25.0%). A majority of the patients in the post-COVID-19 group complained of cognitive deficits (17 of 20; 85.0%), verified using a screening test in 4 of 13 tested patients (30.8%), and confirmed in 5 of 5 patients (100%) when applying multidomain cognitive testing (table 1).

Detection of SARS-CoV-2 RNA in CSF

SARS-CoV-2 RNA (E and/or N gene) was detected in the CSF of five patients at low levels with a median Ct value of 39.21 (37.97-40.00), of whom three patients were in the acute phase of COVID-19, one patient had ongoing COVID-19, and one patient post-COVID-19. None of these results were confirmed by the RT-ddPCR assay or the two additional commercial diagnostic tests.

Assessment of SARS-CoV-2 specific antibody index

Comparing SARS-CoV-2 specific serum antibodies, eleven patients in the acute or ongoing phase of COVID-19 with detectable antibodies had higher levels than the sixteen patients with post-COVID-19 (median RU 48274 vs. 3581, $p<.001$). Anti-SARS-CoV-2 antibody levels in serum inversely correlated with time since the

detection of SARS-CoV-2-RNA in the respiratory tract (figure 2). Regarding SARS-CoV-2 specific antibodies in CSF, eleven patients within the first 90 days of infection and detectable antibodies had higher levels than thirteen patients with post-COVID-19 (median RU 84.7 vs. 7.4, p<.001). Anti-SARS-CoV-2 antibody levels in CSF inversely correlated with time since the detection of SARS-CoV-2-RNA in the respiratory tract (figure 2).

In one patient, an intrathecally produced anti-SARS-CoV-2 antibody fraction was determined as assessed by $AI_{SARS\text{-}CoV\text{-}2}$. This was noted thirty-nine days after the detection of SARS-CoV-2-RNA in the respiratory tract (table 2). In this patient, CSF was taken to further evaluate delirium and ocular motility dysfunction. At the time of sampling, the patient suffered from acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS) due to ongoing COVID-19, complicated by multiple organ dysfunction and septicemia. The same patient showed borderline CSF AIs to measles and rubella (1.42 and 1.37, respectively, negative for varicella-zoster).

DISCUSSION

As the key finding of our study, neither fundamental CSF findings, nor various PCR protocols, or IgG based SARS-CoV-2 directed antibody measures were suggestive of replicative CNS infection as the cause of neuropsychiatric symptoms in post-COVID-19. These post-COVID-19 patients had suffered from a mild course of the acute infection, and cognitive deficits were among the leading complaints. The median age of 50 years was within the range of published post-COVID-19 cohorts[15-17]. We noted an elevated $AI_{SARS\text{-}CoV\text{-}2}$ in one patient with severe ongoing COVID-19-infection, possibly explained by polyspecific immune activation, matching the absence of SARS-CoV-2 RNA from CSF, and borderline AI indexes towards other viruses.

The current evidence for direct viral brain invasion in COVID-19 is conflicting; the frequent detection of SARS-CoV-2 in brain reported by one group[5] was not confirmed by others[18-19]. These autopsy studies included higher aged individuals that diseased from COVID-19, demographics that substantially differed from our post-COVID-19 patients. The same is true for published CSF studies assessing only the acute or ongoing phases of COVID-19[20], and lacking systematic antibody analyses.

Owing the limitations to our study we cannot definitely preclude CNS infection: the sample size is small, a CSF-PCR may fail to detect virus latently infecting brain tissue, and an IgG-based $AI_{SARS\text{-}CoV\text{-}2}$ directed against the spike-protein may miss other immune responses.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, CSF studies such as ours are needed to further explore the still elusive pathogenesis of post-COVID-19. While neuropsychiatric symptoms during acute COVID-19 could be explained by hyper-inflammation, hypoxemia, hypoperfusion, dehydration, glucose dysregulation, and sedation[1], they remain unexplained in post-COVID-19[15-17]. Latent infection, viral

persistence, virus-induced autoimmunity, as well as persistent structural, functional, or metabolic changes following infection, or psycho-social stress are among the alternative non-exclusive explanations[1].

Currently, post-COVID-19 is defined as “signs and symptoms that develop during or after an infection consistent with COVID-19, continue for more than 12 weeks and are not explained by an alternative diagnosis” (www.nice.org.uk/guidance). Such definition based on a temporal association with preceding COVID-19 illustrates the need for biomarker studies to more precisely delineate post-COVID-19 from pre- or co-existing other conditions, given the relatively young patient population with complaints of cognitive deficits several months after SARS-CoV-2 infection.

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Author Contributions

FS, YG, CF, SS, VC, and CW contributed to the conception and design of the study; all authors contributed to the acquisition and analysis of data. FS, YG, and CW contributed to drafting the text or preparing the figures; all authors critically revised the manuscript for important intellectual content.

Potential Conflicts of Interest

CW received personal compensation from BioNTech for participating to an educational discussion. FS, YG, CF, SS, FB, FM, EH, BD, HP, OO, FK, GF, VC have nothing to report.

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Figure 1: Patient enrollment flow chart. The total number of screened patients at two tertiary university hospitals in Germany (Cologne/Berlin) between April 2020 and April 2021 are shown as well as the patients excluded, resulting the total of 40 patients analyzed for the purpose of this study. CSF, cerebrospinal fluid; AI, antibody specific index.

Figure 2: anti-SARS-CoV-2 antibodies in serum and cerebrospinal fluid over time. (A) Anti-SARS-CoV-2 serum and (**B)** CSF specific antibodies significantly decrease assessing patients within the first 30 days (acute COVID-19, n=12), between days 31 and 90 (ongoing COVID-19, n=8) and later than 90 days (post-

COVID-19, n=20) of their SARS-COV-2 infection. **(C)** Intrathecally produced antibodies could not be identified for any of the post-COVID-19 patients.

Table 1: Demographics of acute- and ongoing (A) and Post-COVID-19 (B) patients

A	**sex**	**Age (decade)**	**Symptom onset (d)**	**COVID-19 severity[1]**	**Neuropsychiatric symptoms**	**MMST[2]**	**MOCA[2]**	**NPT[2]**
Acute-COVID-19								
Case 1	m	81-90	0	mild	headache, gait disturbance			
Case 2	m	61-70	6	severe	flaccid paraparesis, delirium, inflammatory neuropathy			
Case 3	m	61-70	13	critical	delirium			
Case 4	f	81-90	9	critical	delirium, myoclonus, transient hemiparesis			
Case 5	f	31-40	21	mild	cognitive deficits, headache, dizziness, fatigue		27	
Case 6	f	71-80	21	critical	delirium, aphasia, impaired consciousness			
Case 7	f	71-80	20	severe	cognitive deficits, delirium, change in personality			
Case 8	m	51-60	28	critical	delirium, generalized seizure, critical illness weakness			
Case 9	m	61-70	13	critical	gaze saccades, ataxia, delirium			
Case 10	f	61-70	1	critical	delirium			
Case 11	m	51-60	29	critical	PRES, intracranial hemorrhage			
Case 12	f	81-90	30	critical	paresis left arm			
Median (range)		63 (56-86)	16.5 (0-30)					
Ongoing-COVID-19								
Case 13	m	21-30	43	critical	cognitive deficits, delirium, delayed polyneuropathy	29		
Case 14	f	51-60	55	mild	myelitis with paraparesis			
Case 15	f		63	mild	myelitis with paraparesis			
Case 16	f	41-50	43	mild	dizziness, limb weakness			
Case 17	m	71-80	39	severe	cognitive deficits, delirium, ocular motility dysfunction			
Case 18	m	31-40	53	mild	cognitive deficits, fatigue, depression	30		
Case 19	f	71-80	66	mild	transient ischemic attack, dizziness			
Case 20	m	71-80	37	severe	Guillain-Barré-Syndrome			
Median (range)		48 (24-77)	48.0 (37-66)					
B	**sex**	**Age (decade)**	**Symptom onset (d)**	**COVID-19 severity[1]**	**Neuropsychiatric symptoms**	**MMST[2]**	**MOCA[2]**	**NPT[2]**
Post-COVID-19								
Case 21	m	31-40	175	mild	cognitive deficits, fatigue	29		●
Case 22	f	21-30	119	mild	cognitive deficits, fatigue, depression, anxiety, myalgia		26	
Case 23	m	51-60	284	severe	cognitive deficits, fatigue, anxiety		26	
Case 24	f	21-30	244	mild	cognitive deficits, fatigue, headache		26	
Case 25	f	51-60	255	mild	cognitive deficits, fatigue, depression		29	
Case 26	f	31-40	286	mild	cognitive deficits, hypoesthesia left arm and left face, right leg		25	
Case 27	f	61-70	113	mild	rapid progression of preexisting polyneuropathy		27	
Case 28	f	41-50	329	mild	fatigue		26	
Case 29	f	51-60	349	mild	cognitive deficits		26	
Case 30	f	21-30	138	mild	cognitive deficits		28	
Case 31	m	41-50	100	mild	cognitive deficits, myalgia		27	
Case 32	m	61-70	143	mild	cognitive deficits, headache, parkinsonian syndrome		24	
Case 33	f	41-50	138	mild	cognitive deficits, fatigue, dizziness	30		●
Case 34	m	51-60	226	mild	cognitive deficits, fatigue	29		●
Case 35	f	41-50	133	mild	cognitive deficits, fatigue, myalgia, sensory deficit, insomnia	29		●
Case 36	m	51-60	120	severe	cognitive deficits, fatigue		20	
Case 37	f	41-50	303	mild	fatigue		28	
Case 38	m	51-60	387	mild	cognitive deficits		24	
Case 39	f	51-60	340	severe	cognitive deficits		28	
Case 40	f	51-60	324	severe	cognitive deficits, depression	30		●
Median (range)		50.5 (23-70)	225.3 (100-387)					

[1]COVID-19 severity: mild: any of the various signs and symptoms of COVID-19 but no shortness of breath, dyspnea, or abnormal chest imaging; moderate: evidence of lower respiratory disease during clinical assessment or imaging and an oxygen saturation (SpO2) ≥94% on room air at sea level; severe: SpO2 <94% on room air at sea level, a ratio of arterial partial pressure of oxygen to fraction of inspired oxygen (PaO2/FiO2)

<300 mm Hg, respiratory frequency >30 breaths/min, or lung infiltrates >50%; critical: respiratory failure, septic shock, and/or multiple organ dysfunction (https://www.covid19treatmentguidelines.nih.gov/, accessed 10/3/2021). MMST: Mini-Mental-Status-Test; MOCA: Montreal Cognitive Assessment, considered pathological for values below 26; NPT: neuropsychological testing battery covering several cognitive domains including learning and memory, attention, executive functioning, language, and visual-construction; [2]blank: testing not performed; ●: patients with pathological findings in at least one NPT domain; PRES: posterior reversible encephalopathy syndrome

Table 2: CSF findings in acute- and ongoing (A) and POST-COVID-19 (B) patients.

A	**CSF lymphocytes /µL**	**total CSF protein [g/L]**	**Anti-SARS-CoV-2 IgG**		**$AI_{SARS-CoV-2}$**	**SARS-CoV-2 RNA (E or N gene), Ct value**
			CSF	**serum**		
Acute-COVID-19						
Case 1	0	0.57	not det.	not det.	-	37.97#
Case 2	1	0.34	638.44	217,210.60	0.20	40.00#
Case 3	1	0.43	not det.	not det.	ND	not det.
Case 4	2	0.29	82.50	84,114.82	0.27	not det.
Case 5	1	0.22	not det.	not det.	-	39.21#
Case 6	1	0.21	84.71	70,504.06	0.42	not det.
Case 7	1	0.35	208.40	95,046.05	0.76	not det.
Case 8	2	0.14	124.02	37,796.22	1.00	not det.
Case 9	1	0.52	not det.	not det.	-	not det.
Case 10	3	0.33	not det.	not det.	-	not det.
Case 11	0	0.46	67.23	13,183.33	1.35	not det.
Case 12	2	0.41	not det.	not det.	-	not det.
Median (range)	1.00 (0-3)	0.34 (0.14-0.57)	104.37 (82.50 – 638.44)	77,309.44 (37,796.22 – 217,210.60)	0.59 (0.20 – 1.00)	
Ongoing-COVID-19						
Case 13	1	0.24	73.41	48,273.96	0.93	not det.
Case 14	4	0.37	9.76	3,201.80	1.20	not det.
Case 15	2	0.23	6.49	4,086.26	1.13	not det.
Case 16	1	0.21	not det.	not det.	-	40.00#
Case 17	1	0.56	479.14	37,622.50	2.50	not det.
Case 18	6	0.39	not det.	not det.	-	not det.
Case 19	1	0.46	not det.	not det.	-	not det.
Case 20	0	0.88	2,350.40	249,768.96	1.06	not det.
Median (range)	1.00 (0-6)	0.38 (0.23-0.88)	73.41 (6.49 – 2,350.40)	37,622.50 (3,201.80 – 249,768.96)	1.06 (0.93 – 2.50)	
B	**CSF lymphocytes /µL**	**total CSF protein [g/L]**	**Anti-SARS-CoV-2 IgG**		**$AI_{SARS-CoV-2}$**	**SARS-CoV-2 RNA (E or N gene), Ct value**
			CSF	**serum**		
Post-COVID-19						
Case 21	0	0.42	not det.	not det.	-	not det.
Case 22	3	0.19	not det.	1,182.71	-	not det.
Case 23	1	0.25	47.76	25,994.37	1.15	38.20#
Case 24	5	0.36	5.74	1,983.64	0.77	not det.
Case 25	7	0.36	8.95	3,916.38	0.86	not det.
Case 26	1	0.24	3.59	2,340.37	0.97	not det.
Case 27	2	0.26	3.88	6,233.72	0.20	not det.
Case 28	2	0.28	not det.	not det.	-	not det.
Case 29	1	0.33	7.69	3,975.46	0.80	not det.
Case 30	1	0.16	2.35	1,600.14	1.40	not det.
Case 31	4	0.33	6.40	3,244.73	0.80	not det.
Case 32	4	0.55	23.50	6,144.03	0.77	not det.
Case 33	0	0.31	13.23	5,984.96	1.02	not det.
Case 34	0	0.26	not det.	121.71	-	not det.
Case 35	1	0.22	10.99	11,228.37	0.55	not det.
Case 36	0	0.39	7.41	4,023.44	0.94	not det.
Case 37	2	0.29	not det.	not det.	-	not det.
Case 38	1	0.25	not det.	739.52	-	not det.
Case 39	8	0.41	4.63	1,598.22	0.78	not det.
Case 40	1	0.21	17.32	13,146.16	0.95	not det.
Median (range)	1.00 (0-8)	0.29 (0.19-0.55)	7.55 (3.59 – 47.76)	3,916.38 (121.71 – 25,994.37)	0.83 (0.20 – 1.40)	

CSF, cerebrospinal fluid; not det., not detected. Oligoclonal band status was available in 33 of the 40 patients and 17 of the 20 patients with post-COVID19 syndrome, with none of the patients showing type 2 or 3 oligoclonal bands suggestive of intrathecally produced antibodies. #, not confirmed using alternative PCR protocols, for details see method section.