

SARS-CoV-2 in Myelodysplastic Syndromes: A Snapshot From Early Italian Experience

Sandra Mossuto¹, Enrico Attardi^{1,2}, Francesco Alesiani^{1,3}, Emanuele Angelucci^{1,4}, Enrico Baileari^{1,5}, Massimo Bernardi^{1,6}, Gianni Binotto^{1,7}, Costanza Bosi^{1,8}, Anna Calvisi^{1,9}, Isabella Capodanno^{1,10}, Antonella Carbone^{11,12}, Andrea Castelli^{1,13}, Marco Cerrano^{1,14}, Rosanna Ciancia^{1,15}, Daniela Cilloni^{1,16}, Marino Clavio^{1,17}, Cristina Clissa^{1,18}, Elena Crisà^{1,19}, Monica Crugnola^{1,20}, Matteo G. Della Porta^{1,21}, Nicola Di Renzo^{1,22}, Ambra Di Veroli^{1,23}, Roberto Fattizzo²⁴, Carmen Fava^{1,25}, Susanna Fenu^{11,26}, Ida L. Ferrara^{1,27}, Luana Fianchi^{11,28}, Carla Fili^{1,29}, Carlo Finelli^{1,30}, Valentina Giai^{1,31}, Francesco Frattini^{1,32}, Valentina Gaidano^{1,33}, Gianluca Guaragna^{1,34}, Svitlana Gumenyuk^{11,35}, Roberto Latagliata^{11,36}, Stefano Mancini^{11,37}, Emanuela Messa^{1,38}, Alfredo Molteni^{1,39}, Pellegrino Musto^{1,40}, Pasquale Niscola^{1,41}, Esther Oliva^{1,42}, Giuseppe A. Palumbo^{1,43}, Annamaria Pelizzari^{1,44}, Federica Pilo^{1,45}, Antonella Poloni^{1,46}, Marta Riva^{1,47}, Flavia Rivellini^{1,48}, Chiara Sarlo^{11,49}, Mariarita Sciumé^{1,24}, Roberto Secchi^{11,50}, Carmine Selleri^{1,27}, Agostino Tafuri^{11,51}, Valeria Santini^{1,2}

Correspondence: Valeria Santini (e-mail: valeria.santini@unifi.it).

¹Italian MDS Foundation - ETS (FISIM - ETS), Bologna, Italy

²Hematology, University of Florence, AOU Careggi, Florence, Italy

³Hematology and Transplant Center, Area Vasta 3 Macerata-ASUR Marche, Ospedale di Civitanova Marche, Italy

⁴Hematology and Transplant Center, IRCCS Policlinico San Martino Hospital, Genova, Italy

⁵Internal Medicine- Azienda Sanitaria locale 1 Imperiese- Imperia, Italy

⁶Hematology and Bone Marrow Transplantation, IRCCS San Raffaele Scientific Institute, Milan, Italy

⁷Unit of Hematology and Clinical Immunology, University of Padova, Padova, Italy

⁸Division of Hematology, AUSL di Piacenza, Piacenza, Italy

⁹Hematology Division and Bone Marrow Transplantation Unit, San Francesco Hospital, Nuoro, Italy

¹⁰Hematology Unit, Azienda Unità Sanitaria Locale-IRCCS, Reggio Emilia, Italy

¹¹GROM-L (Gruppo Romano-Laziale MDS), Italy

¹²Hematology Unit, Presidio Ospedaliero di Frosinone, Italy

¹³Division of Hematology, Ospedale Degli Infermi, Biella, Italy

¹⁴Division of Hematology, University of Torino, AOU Città della Salute e Della Scienza, Torino, Italy

¹⁵Unit of Onco-hematology, Hematopoietic Transplants and Cell Therapies, Centro di Riferimento Oncologico di Aviano (CRO) IRCCS, Italy

¹⁶Department of Clinical and Biological Sciences of the University of Turin, San Luigi Hospital, Orbassano, Turin, Italy

¹⁷Clinic of Hematology, Department of Internal Medicine (DiMI), University of Genoa, Genoa, Italy

¹⁸Hematology and Hematopoietic Stem Cell Transplant Center, AORMN (Azienda Ospedaliera Ospedali Riuniti Marche Nord), Pesaro, Italy

¹⁹Division of Hematology, Department of Translational Medicine, Università del Piemonte Orientale and Ospedale Maggiore della Carità, Novara, Italy

²⁰Hematology Unit and BMT Center, Azienda Ospedaliero Universitaria di Parma, Parma, Italy

²¹Cancer Center, Humanitas Research Hospital and Humanitas University, Milan, Italy

²²Hematology and BMT Unit, Ospedale Vito Fazzi, Lecce, Italy

²³Hematology Unit Ospedale. Bel Colle-Viterbo, Italy

²⁴Hematology Unit, Fondazione IRCCS Ca' Granda Ospedale Maggiore Policlinico, Milan, Italy

²⁵Department of Clinical and Biological Sciences of the University of Turin, Mauriziano Hospital, Italy

²⁶Hematology Department, AO, San Giovanni-Addolorata, Rome, Italy

²⁷Department of Medicine and Surgery, University of Salerno, Salerno, Italy

²⁸Hematology Unit, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (UCSC) Roma, Italy

²⁹Clinical Hematology, Transplant Center and Cell Therapy, Azienda Sanitaria

Universitaria Integrata di Udine, S. Maria della Misericordia, Udine, Italy

³⁰UO Hematology, AOU Policlinico Sant'Orsola-Malpighi, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

³¹Division of Hematology, Department of Oncology, AOU Città della Salute e della Scienza, Turin, Italy

³²Department of Hematology and Transfusion Medicine, Carlo Poma Hospital, Mantova, Italy

³³Hematology, SS.Antonio, Biagio e Cesare Arrigo Hospital, Alessandria, Italy

³⁴Hematology and BMT Unit-"Antonio Perrino" Hospital, 72100 Brindisi, Italy

³⁵Hematology and Stem Cell Transplantation Unit, Regina Elena National Cancer Institute IRCCS-IFO - Rome, Italy

³⁶Hematology Department, University La Sapienza, Rome, Italy

³⁷Hematology Unit, AO San Camillo-Forlanini, Rome, Italy.

³⁸UO Internal Medicine, ASLT04, Carmagnola, Italy

³⁹Hematology Unit, ASST Cremona, Cremona, Italy

⁴⁰Chair of Hematology and Unit of Hematology and Stem Cell Transplantation,

"Aldo Moro" University School of Medicine, AOU Consorziata Policlinico, Bari, Italy.

⁴¹Hematology Unit, Sant'Eugenio Hospital, Rome, Italy

⁴²UO Hematology, Grande Ospedale Metropolitano, "Bianchi Melacrino Morelli", Reggio Calabria, Italy

⁴³Department of Scienze Mediche Chirurgiche e Tecnologie Avanzate, "G.F. Ingrassia", University of Catania, Italy

⁴⁴Hematology, ASST-Spedali Civili, Brescia, Italy

⁴⁵Hematology and Transplant Center, Ospedale Oncologico "Armando Businco" Cagliari, Italy

⁴⁶Hematology, Polytechnic University of Marche, AUO Ospedali Riuniti, Ancona, Italy

⁴⁷Hematology, ASST Grande Ospedale Metropolitano Niguarda, Milan, Italy

⁴⁸Onco-Hematology, "A. Tortora" Hospital, Pagani (Sa), Italy

⁴⁹Hematology and Stem Cell Transplantation Unit, University Campus Bio-Medico, Rome, Italy

⁵⁰Hematology Division, University of Tor Vergata, Rome, Italy.

⁵¹Hematology Institute, La Sapienza University of Rome, S. Andrea Hospital, Rome, Italy.

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Myelodysplastic syndrome patients are subjects of advanced age, vulnerable and frail, whose outcome is heavily influenced by pre-existing comorbidities worsening the hematologic condition. Infections are a rather common cause of death (around 30%), especially, but not only, for IPSS-R higher risk patients.¹⁻³ In MDS there is a significant impairment of lymphopoiesis, resulting in lymphopenia ($ALC < 1.0 \times 10^9/l$) in around 38% of MDS patients and poor prognosis.⁴ Data on innate and adoptive immune systems (either disease related or due to immunosenescence) and the subsequent supposed susceptibility and incidence of viral infections in MDS are scarce.⁵

With all these considerations in mind, at Coronavirus outbreak in Italy, the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic was so extremely rapid that we were expecting to face in short times a very large number of severely symptomatic MDS patients and tried to rapidly learn from the earlier and more severely hit areas.⁶ As per April 28, date until which we collected our data, and in full emergency, the number of diagnosed cases of SARS-Cov2 in Italy was 199.470 with 25.215 deaths.⁷ In the same period, in the general population around 10% of tested cases were actually infected.⁸

Collection of data in the national MDS Registry (FISiM) and the regional Registry for Rome and surrounding area (GROM) has been approved by local Ethical Committees. Through these 2 networks we collected data regarding laboratory-confirmed severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) in MDS patients symptomatic and tested from February 24 to April 28, 2020. Data have been obtained from 50 Centers. Total number of MDS patients followed up in that period was 5326 as per April 28, median age 73 years. As per national guidelines, oropharyngeal and nasal swab with PCR was performed in regional laboratories for all suspected cases: 305/5326, tested irrespective of gravity of symptoms, and the presence of true SARS-CoV-2 infection sent for confirmation in the national reference central laboratory (Istituto superiore di sanità -ISS). Confirmed SARS-CoV-2 was diagnosed in 63/305 tested cases (20.6%), globally in 63/5326 (1.18%) MDS patients, in the time frame indicated above. Median age of affected MDS patients was 78 years. We evaluated the distribution of SARS-CoV-2 cases dividing the Country into three macro-regions, considering adhering Centers and the epidemiology and cumulative incidence of COVID-19 in Italy:⁷ 3 Regions of Northern Italy (Lombardia, Piemonte and Emilia Romagna, SARS-CoV-2 > 500 cases /100.000 inhabitants, as per April 28), Rome and surroundings (specific GROM Registry), and Rest of Italy (Table 1). The majority of SARS-CoV-2 cases and cumulative incidence among MDS patients was localized in the 3 Regions of Northern Italy (LPE) (1.6%), consistent with the data of COVID-19 epidemic in the general population of the area (62.4% of total Italian cases),⁷

while in Rome and Rest of Italy it was < 1%, (0.3 and 0.85% respectively). Median age of affected MDS patients in LPE Regions was 81 years, in Rome 71 years and in the rest of Italy 77 years.

At the time of analysis, only 33/63 patients were alive, indicating a lethality rate significantly higher than that of non-MDS population (same age range 70–79 years: 28.9% deceased, lethality 24%).⁷

Available details on demographics, clinical characteristics and treatment of 63 MDS patients with SARS-CoV-2 are indicated in Table 2. It is evident that SARS-CoV-2 affected prevalently male subjects, confirming the observation in non-MDS Italian affected population aged 70 to 79 yrs. In particular, although numbers are extremely small, the lethality rate was higher in male MDS patients (73% of total deaths). To note, the same trend was noted for male patient in the general population infected (lethality for male 29.5% vs 16.7% for female aged 70–79 years),⁷ while survival of MDS patients was not apparently influenced by age (median age 78 years in both groups). Reported cause of death for all 30 cases was respiratory failure, in 82% of cases COVID-19 was complicated by bacterial pneumonia and 5% cardiac failure. ARDS was indicated in 50% of deceased cases. Regarding IPSS-R risk categories, the majority of patients who recovered were lower risk ones (62%), while deceased patients were in the great majority IPSS-R higher risk ones (17/30). There is no statistically significant difference for infection, gravity of infection or survival according to the type of treatment received, in part due to the small figures when we come to the granularity of therapies. A higher proportion of patients was in treatment with azacitidine, consistent with their diagnosis of IPSS-R higher risk MDS. The totality of the MDS patients who were diagnosed with SARS-CoV-2 had multiple severe comorbidities (> 3 comorbidities 80% of cases).

A few patients received only supportive care for COVID-19 infection, either for milder clinical presentation (3/33) or, on the contrary, for a rapid and extremely aggressive onset leading to early death (3/30). In the majority of cases, MDS specific therapies were suspended.

The impact of SARS-CoV-2 on the frail MDS population was evaluated in a limited time frame during the peak of the pandemic in Italy and the strict national lockdown. Incidence of symptomatic infection was not as relevant as expected in MDS patients for whom neutropenia, lymphopenia, stress erythropoiesis and iron overload could have determined a substantial susceptibility to and gravity of SARS-CoV-2. Similar observations were recently reported, in a much younger population of beta thalassemic patients.⁹ Median age of SARS-CoV-2 MDS patients was higher than that of the affected Italian MDS population, and this, together with comorbidities, may account for the high lethality rate observed.¹⁰ This report is limited and

Table 1

Distribution of SARS-CoV-2 Positive MDS Patients Diagnosed from February 24th to April 28th 2020, Respect to Number of MDS Patients in Treatment in 50 Italian Hematology Centers.

Region	N° of MDS Patients Registered	SARS-CoV-2 Positive MDS Patients (%)
LPE Regions*	2689 (51%)	44/63 (70%)
Rome and surroundings	767 (14%)	3/63 (5%)
Rest of Italy	1870 (35%)	16/63 (25%)
Total	5326 (100%)	63 (100%)

According to the Centers that provided data, Italian territory was subdivided into 3 macroregions, following the differences in cumulative incidence of COVID-19 infection in general population. Regions with a cumulative incidence of SARS-Cov-2 > 500/100.000 inhabitants, as per April 28th,⁷ that is Lombardia, Piemonte, and Emilia Romagna *(LPE) were analyzed separately. Globally 1.18% of MDS patients under treatment or observation in the period indicated was affected by SARS-Cov-2, 20.6% of patients who underwent molecular testing, with a median age of 78 years.

Table 2**Demographics and Clinical Characteristics of MDS Patients Diagnosed with SARS-CoV-2 and Available Data on MDS and COVID-19 Treatment.**

		N° of MDS patients alive 33/63	N° of MDS patients deceased 30/63
Age (median)	Years	78	78
Sex	M/F	42/21	22/8
IPSS-R	Very low	0/33	2/30
	Low	19/33	4/30
	Intermediate	8/33	7/30
	High	2/33	11/30
	Very High	2/33	6/30
MDS Therapy	NA	2/33	0/30
	ESA	16/33	4/30
	HMA	4/33	15/30
	HMA+ venetoclax	1/33	-
	BSC	8/33	5/30
	BSC+ chelation	1/33	-
	Lenalidomide	-	1/30
	Danazol	-	2/30
	W/W	3/33	3/30
	COVID 19 Therapy	Antibiotics	26/33
Hydroxychloroquine		24/33	28/30
Steroids		4/33	4/30
Lmw Heparin		6/33	10/30
Lopinavir/Ritonavir		1/33	1/30
Darunavir/Cobicistat		3/33	10/30
ICU		12/33	17/30
Supportive therapy only		3/33	3/30
Antivirals (not specified)		1/33	1/30
Tocilizumab		2/33	6/30

preliminary (early landmark date), produced during the health emergency. Here we share the international problem of general epidemiology of SARS-CoV-2. In fact, we do not have data for asymptomatic infected MDS patients, for whom diagnostic procedures were not performed, and still complete data are lacking. At present, after resolution of the health emergency, routine serology evaluation of COVID-19 antibodies is ongoing for MDS patients managed in our Centers.

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