**Association between critical care admission and 6-month functional outcome after spontaneous intracerebral haemorrhage**

1,2 Siobhan Mc Lernon, MSc; 1Duncan Wilson, PhD; 4Gareth Ambler, PhD; 1,3Ghil Schwarz, MD; 2Russell Goodwin, MA; 1Clare Shakeshaft, MSc; 5Hannah Cohen, PhD; 6Tarek Yousry, PhD; 7Rustam Al-Shahi Salman, PhD; 11Gregory YH Lip, FRCP; 10 Henry Houlden, PhD; 1Martin M Brown, FRCP; 9Keith W Muir, MD; 6Hans Rolf Jäger, MD; 2Louise Terry, PhD;\* 1David J Werring PhD\*; on behalf of the CROMIS-2 Collaborators

*1Stroke Research Centre, University College London, Institute of Neurology, London, UK*

*2London South Bank University, School of Health and Social Care, London, UK*

*3Department of Neurology, Stroke Unit San Raffaele Hospital, Milan, Italy*

*4Department of Statistical Science, University College London, Gower Street, London, UK*

*5Haemostasis Research Unit, Department of Haematology, University College London, 51 Chenies Mews, London, UK*

*6Lysholm Department of Neuroradiology and the Neuroradiological Academic Unit, Department of Brain Repair and Rehabilitation, UCL Institute of Neurology, Queen Square, London, UK*

*7Centre for Clinical Brain Sciences, School of Clinical Sciences, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK*

*8University of Birmingham Institute of Cardiovascular Sciences, City Hospital, Birmingham, UK*

*9Institute of Neuroscience & Psychology, University of Glasgow, Queen Elizabeth University Hospital, Glasgow, UK*

*10Department of Molecular Neuroscience, UCL Institute of Neurology and the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery, Queen Square, London*

*11University of Liverpool, Cardiovascular Science at the University of Liverpool and Liverpool Heart & Chest Hospital. UK*

**Corresponding author**: Siobhan Mc Lernon, 102 Borough Road, London South Bank University, SE1 0AA. Email: mclernt@lsbu.ac.uk; Tel: 020 78158006

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**ABSTRACT**

**Background.** There is uncertainty about the clinical benefit of admission to critical care after spontaneous intracerebral haemorrhage (ICH).

**Purpose**. We investigated factors associated with critical care admission after spontaneous ICH and evaluated associations between critical care and 6-month functional outcome.

**Methods.** We included 825 patients with acute spontaneous non-traumatic ICH, recruited to a prospective multicenter observational study. We evaluated the characteristics associated with critical care admission and poor 6-month functional outcome (modified Rankin Scale, mRS > 3) using univariable (chi-square test and Wilcoxon rank-sum test, as appropriate) and multivariable analysis.

**Results.** 286 patients (38.2%) had poor 6-month functional outcome. Seventy-seven (9.3%) patients were admitted tocritical care. Patients admitted to critical care were; younger (p<0.001), had lower GCS score (p<0.001), larger ICH volume (p<0.001), and more often had intraventricular extension (p = 0.008). They also underwent neurosurgery more frequently (p<0.001) and had a higher proportion of patients with poor functional outcome at 6 months (39/77 [50.7%] vs 286/748 [38.2%]; p = 0.034). In multivariable analysis, critical care maintained its association with a higher odds of poor functional outcome (adjusted OR 2.43 [95%CI 1.36-4.35], p=0.003).

**Conclusions.** Admission to critical careis associated with poor 6-month functional outcome after spontaneous ICH. Our findings provide prognostic information that can help guide critical care treatment decisions after ICH.

**INTRODUCTION**

Acute spontaneous intracerebral haemorrhage (ICH) accounts for about 15% of all strokes, affecting approximately 2 million people worldwide each year1. ICH remains the deadliest and least treatable form of stroke; almost half of patients die within the first month, and 80% of survivors are dependent on a caregiver2.

The term “critical care”refers to care in a high-dependency unit (HDU) and/or Intensive Care Unit (ICU)3 and provides specialized, continuous, multidisciplinary care for patients with a life-threatening, but treatable, condition. Projections show that the overall stroke burden in Europe will further increase by 35% by 20504. This, combined with changing population demographics and improved chronic disease management, may potentially lead to more patients being considered for critical care treatment. Given the healthcare costs of acute care and for survivors that extend beyond admission, this trend might be unsustainable5.

Currently, decisions about access to critical care for ICH patients are variably decided on by local preferences and bed availability, with few standardised care pathways or protocols. This has resulted in a lack of clear guidance on which patients might benefit. Some clinicians consider critical care to have little value for ICH6, 7,yet clinical nihilism (including early DNAR [do not attempt resuscitation] orders) is independently associated with a poor outcome after

ICH.8, 9, 10

We aimed (1) to investigate factors associated with critical care admission after spontaneous ICH and (2) to evaluate the association between critical care admission and 6-month functional outcome in a UK prospective, multicentre, hospital-based observational study.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Patient Selection**

This is a post hoc analysis of The Clinical Relevance of Microbleeds In Stroke Study, (CROMIS-2 ICH), a prospective multicentre observational cohort study of patients with acute spontaneous ICH. Full details of the study protocol are described in detail elsewhere11. The study included adult patients with neuroimaging-confirmed ICH from 79 centres in the UK (and 1 in the Netherlands) between August 2011 and July 2015. The study protocol excluded secondary causes for ICH, such as major head trauma in previous 24 hours, vascular malformations, tumours, cavernomas, intracranial aneurysms, other known coagulopathy, or haemorrhagic transformation of an infarction. The study was approved by the National Research Ethics Service (IRAS reference 10/HO716/61). Written informed consent was obtained from all patients (or a relevant consultee or legal representative per local legislation).

Demographic, clinical and radiological characteristics of patients were collected. Patients were admitted to critical care following local standard clinical practice according to the attending clinician. Brain imaging was performed at each study centre per standardised techniques and analysed centrally by trained staff. ICH location was defined according to The Cerebral Hemorrhage Anatomical RaTing inStrument (CHARTS)12. Intraventricular extension was rated by experienced raters. Haematoma volume was calculated using a previously described validated semi-automated planimetric method13. Long-term functional outcome was measured at 6 months through modified Rankin scale (mRS)14. mRS was dichotomized as good (0-3) and poor (4-6).We undertook follow-up by postal questionnaire at 6 months using a validated outcome self-reporting questionnaire15. For non-responders, we checked that they were still alive with their General Practitioner (GP) and re-sent the questionnaire. In the event that data were still not obtained, follow-up was then obtained by standardised telephone interview using a validated patient follow-up questionnaire15. Only patients with complete follow-up and all clinical and radiological variables of interest were included in the analysis.

**Statistical analysis**

We described continuous and categorical variables using mean and standard deviation (SD), median and interquartile range (IQR), or as number and percentage, as appropriate. In univariable analysis, we used chi-square and Wilcoxon/Mann–Whitney tests as appropriate.

Univariate comparisons between critical care vs non-critical patients were used to identify differences in the groups and predictors of critical care admission. Widely accepted clinical and radiological variables considered to be relevant 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21 were used for the comparison. Similarly, univariable comparison between good vs poor long-term functional outcome was performed (chi-square and Wilcoxon/Mann–Whitney tests as appropriate). After checking for multicollinearity (Pearson r correlation, cut-off 0.5), variables found to be statistically significant in univariate models (p < 0.1) were included in multivariable logistic regression model with mRS at 6-months (dichotomized: good [mRS 0-3] vs poor [mRS 4-6]). Results are reported as odds ratios (OR) with 95% confidence intervals (CI). The significance level was set at p=0.05. Statistical analysis was performed using STATA 16 (StataCorp. 2011. *Stata Statistical Software: Release 16*. College Station, TX: StataCorp LP).

**RESULTS**

Of the original cohort of patients included in the CROMIS-2 (ICH) study (n=1037), we excluded 131 (12.6%) patients without 6-month follow-up data, and 81 (7.8%) patients with missing essential clinical or radiological variables (Figure 1). Included and excluded patients were similar in terms of clinical and radiological characteristics.

The final cohort consisted of 825 patients; Table 1 shows baseline clinical characteristics, radiological variables and outcome in the entire cohort, critical care and non-critical care admitted patients. Median age was 75.7 years (IQR 16.6), 352 patients were female (42.7%), 555 (67.3%) suffered from hypertension and 151 (18.3%) from diabetes mellitus. Median GCS at presentation was 15 (IQR 1). Three hundred and forty-one patients (41.3%) were on anticoagulant drugs at the time of index event; 118 (14.3%) had a pre-ICH mRS > 2. In the entire cohort, 409 patients (49.6%) experienced deep ICH, 348 (42.2%) lobar ICH and 68 (8.2%) infratentorial. Median ICH volume was 7 ml (IQR 15.2); intraventricular extension was present in 245 patients (29.7%).

**Critical care and non-critical care**

Seventy-seven patients (9.3%) were admitted in critical care and 748 (90.7%) in non-critical care units (including any other ward other than intensive care and/or a high dependency unit [HDU]). Patients admitted to critical care were significantly younger than those not admitted (median age: 65.0 years [IQR 13.1] vs 76.3 years [IQR 15.6]; p < 0.001) and had lower GCS scores (median GCS: 14 [IQR 3] vs 15 [IQR 1]; p < 0.001)*,* more frequently underwent neurosurgery (21/77 [27.3%] vs 4/748 [0.43%]; p < 0.001) and received blood pressure lowering treatment (38/77 [49.4%] vs 136/748 [18.2%]; p < 0.001).Neuroimaging findings showed that critical care admitted patients had larger ICH volumes (median volume: 14.0 ml [IQR 25.8] vs 6.9 ml [IQR 14.2]; p < 0.001) and were more likely to have intraventricular extension (33/77 [42.9%] vs 212/748 [28.3%]; p = 0.008). Critical care patients had poorer long-term mRS than non-critical care patients (mRS > 3 in 39/77 [50.7%] vs 286/748 [38.2%]; p = 0.034).

**Outcome at 6-months**

Clinical and radiological variables associated with poor (mRS > 3) 6-months functional outcome are reported in Table 2 (univariable analysis). Critical care admission (OR 1.66 [95%CI 1.04-2.65]; p = 0.035), age (OR 1.06 per year increase [95%CI 1.05-1.08]; p < 0.001), female gender (OR 2.17 [1.64-2.89]; p < 0.001), baseline GCS (OR 0.66 per point [95%CI 0.60-0.73]; p < 0.001), arterial hypertension (OR 1.62 [95%CI 1.19-2.20]; p = 0.002), diabetes mellitus (OR 1.91 [95%CI 1.34-2.72]; p < 0.001), anticoagulant therapy at the time of index event (OR 1.42 [95%CI 1.07-1.88]; p = 0.016) and pre-ICH mRS > 2 (OR 1.44 [95%CI 0.65-3.19]; p < 0.001) were all associated with poor 6-month functional outcome.

Regarding radiological variables, poor outcome was associated with larger ICH volume (OR 1.02 per ml increase [95%CI 1.01-1.03]; p < 0.001) and intraventricular extension (OR 2.46 [95%CI 1.81-3.34]; p < 0.001). No collinearity was found between any of the variables significantly associated with poor functional outcome (not shown).

In the multivariable model (Table 3) critical care admission maintained a significant association with poor 6-month functional outcome (OR 2.43 [95%CI 1.36-4.35]; p = 0.003). Other variables associated with poor outcome in a multivariable model were: age (OR 1.06 per year increase [95%CI 1.36-4.35]; p < 0.001), GCS (OR 0.72 per point [95%CI 0.65-0.81]; p < 0.001), ICH volume (OR 1.01 per ml increase [95%CI 1.00-1.02]; p = 0.033), IV extension (OR 1.83 [95%CI 1.27-2.62]; p = 0.001), female gender (OR 1.65 [95%CI 1.18-2.31]; p = 0.003), diabetes mellitus (OR 2.15 [95%CI 1.40-3.30]; p < 0.001) and pre-ICH mRS >2 (OR 2.95 [95%CI 1.84- 4.74]; p < 0.001).

**Sensitivity analysis**

In a sensitivity analysis, we evaluated alternative approaches to assessment of poor outcome. We considered 1) mRS>2 as poor functional outcome and 2) ordinal regression analysis of full range of mRS scores. Univariable odd ratios for critical care for mRS>2 is very similar to that for mRS>3 (OR 1.69 [95% CI 1.00-2.85; p = 0.047] and OR 1.66 [95%CI 1.04-2.65; p = 0.034], respectively. In ordinal logistic regression analysis, patients admitted to critical care unit showed an OR 1.47 (95% CI 0.98 – 2.20; p = 0.07) for a shift in scores on the modified Rankin Scale. Univariate association between clinical/radiological characteristics and mRS>2 and distribution of mRS scores at 6 months are reported in Appendix (e-1 and e-2).

**DISCUSSION**

We found that critical care admission is strongly associated with poor 6-month functional outcome after spontaneous ICH (both in univariable and multivariable analysis). However, as expected, patients who require critical care have more severe ICH. Despite adjustment for markers of ICH severity and poor prognosis (including lower GCS scores, large ICH volume, intraventricular extension and surgery), we cannot fully exclude unmeasured confounding factors, so residual confounding exists.

The characteristics we found to be associated with critical care admission are consistent with previous data. A *post hoc* analysis of The Intensive Blood Pressure Reduction in Acute Cerebral Hemorrhage Trial 2 (INTERACT2) study found that predictors of ICU admission included (among others) younger age, clinically severe ICH (NIHSS > 14), large ICH volumes, intraventricular extension and surgery22. There are few formal critical care pathways or protocols to guide the management of ICH patients. Without a standardized approach, critical care admission is decided by treating physician, per local preferences and availability. The lack of critical care pathways is also reflected in the different proportion of patients admitted to critical care across studies and countries. In our study, only a small proportion of patients (9.3%) were admitted to critical care, confirming that only the most severely affected patients are referred. However, in INTERACT2 study, up to 40% of patients required intensive care unit (ICU) admission. This major difference may be due to the higher proportion of ICU admission in Chinese hospitals (71% of ICU patients were admitted in Chinese ICUs) and most likely reflects service and cultural differences23.

Regarding outcome after critical care admission, one might expect that continuous intensive care and multidisciplinary expertise can improve outcome. However, our findings support existing evidence that suggests that admission to critical care after ICH is associated with a higher risk of major disability and death22, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28 even after adjusting for baseline ICH severity. Beside critical care admission (and clinical/radiological severity-related variables), we found that increasing age and female gender are significantly associated with a poor outcome after ICH; this is again consistent with existing evidence.21, 29

We measured 6-month outcome using the mRS, which is heavily weighted towards motor disability and does not fully reflect health-related quality of life (HRQol) measures. The score implies that death (mRS 6) is worse than severe disability (mRS 5), whereas the opposite view could be argued.30 More qualitative research on the lived experiences of stroke survivors (and their carers and family members) is required to fully elucidate the true effectiveness of critical care.

Due to severity of ICH we used mRS>3 to define poor functional outcome, but many studies on cerebrovascular disease use a cutoff of mRS>2 or ordinal regression analysis. In our sensitivity analysis, we found that univariable odds ratio (for critical care) for mRS>2 are very similar to that from the mRS>3. However, using ordinal regression analysis we found a slightly lower odds ratio for a shift in scores on the modified Rankin Scale. Other independent studies are needed to elucidate the role of critical care admission in optimizing outcome after ICH.

Our study has strengths as it included a large population cohort with a multicentre design therefore our results should be generalizable to western populations. Some limitations deserve comment. The CROMIS-2 study required signed informed consent. This could have created a selection bias towards non-extremely severe ICH. Although we adjusted for factors known to influence outcome after ICH, only a small proportion of patients (9.3%) were admitted to critical care, limiting statistical power and precision. Additionally our sample lacked detailed data on care pathways therefore residual confounding could still be a factor. We could not adjust our models for advanced directives, frailty, or unrecorded changes in physiological parameters.

**CONCLUSION**

Our study suggests that, after spontaneous ICH, admission to critical care is associated with poor functional outcome at 6-months. However, patients admitted to critical care were generally more severely affected, with higher *a priori* potential to suffer neurological deterioration and poor outcome. Despite adjustment for markers of ICH severity and poor prognosis we cannot exclude unmeasured confounding, so further evaluation, ideally in randomised trials, is needed to elucidate the true effectiveness of critical care in optimising long-term outcome for ICH patients. Our findings can nevertheless inform prognosis and care pathways for critical care admission after ICH.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST:** There are no conflicts of interest.

**DISCLOSURES:** None

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| **Table 1.** Clinical, radiological characteristics and outcome in the entire cohort and univariate associations with critical care admission |
|  | **Entire cohort****N (%)** | **Critical Care****N (%)** | **Non-Critical Care****N (%)** | **P value** |
| *N (%)*  | *825* | *77 (9.3)* | *748 (90.7)* |  |
| **Age** (median; [IQR]) | 75.7 [16.6] | 65.0 [13.1] | 76.3 [15.6] | <0.001 |
| **Female gender** | 352 (42.7) | 27 (35.1) | 325 (43.5) | 0.157 |
| **GCS** (median; [IQR]) | 15 [1] | 14 [3] | 15 [1] | <0.001 |
| **ICH volume**\*(median; [IQR]) | 7.0 [15.2] | 14.0 [25.8] | 6.9 [14.2] | <0.001 |
| **Intra-ventricular extension** | 245 (29.7) | 33 (42.9) | 212 (28.3) | 0.008 |
| **ICH location**DeepLobarInfratentorial | 409 (49.6)348 (42.2)68 (8.2) | 41 (53.2)28 (36.4)8 (10.4) | 368 (49.2)320 (42.8)60 (8.0) | 0.500 |
| **Arterial Hypertension** | 555 (67.3) | 53 (68.8) | 502 (67.1) | 0.760 |
| **Diabetes Mellitus** | 151 (18.3) | 18 (23.4) | 133 (17.8) | 0.227 |
| **Oral anticoagulant drug** | 341 (41.3) | 26 (33.8) | 315 (42.1) | 0.157 |
| **Pre-ICH mRS > 2** | 118 (14.3) | 6 (7.8) | 112 (15.0) | 0.087 |
| **Neurosurgery**  | 25 (3.0) | 21 (27.3) | 4 (0.43) | <0.001 |
| **Blood Pressure lowering treatment**  | 174 (21.1) | 38 (49.4) | 136 (18.2) | <0.001 |
| **mRS at 6 months** |  |  |  | 0.157 |
| 0 | 150 (18.2) | 11 (14.3) | 139 (18.6) |  |
| 1 | 109 (13.2) | 6 (7.8) | 103 (13.8) |  |
| 2 | 52 (6.3) | 4 (5.2) | 48 (6.4) |  |
| 3 | 189 (22.9) | 17 (22.1) | 172 (23.0) |  |
| 4 | 74 (9.0) | 13 (16.8) | 61 (8.2) |  |
| 5 | 118 (14.3) | 11 (14.3) | 107 (14.3) |  |
| 6 | 133 (16.1) | 15 (19.5) | 118 (15.8) |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| **mRS >3 at 6 months** | 325 (39.4) | 39 (50.7) | 286 (38.2) | 0.034 |
| **mRS >2 at 6 months** | 514 (62.3) | 56 (72.7) | 458 (61.2) | 0.047 |
| *\*ml**ICH, intra-cerebral haemorrhage; GCS, Glasgow Coma Scale; mRS, modified Rankin Scale* |

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| **Table 2.** Clinical and radiological characteristics and univariate associations with poor functional outcome at 6 months (mRS >3) |
| **Variable** | **Poor outcome** | **OR (95% CI)** | **P value** |
| **Non-critical care** | 286 (38.2) | REF |  |
| **Critical care** | 39 (50.7) | 1.66 (1.04-2.65) | 0.035 |
| **Age** (median [IQR]) | 80.7 [12.8] | 1.06 (1.05-1.08) \* | <0.001 |
| **Female gender****Male gender** | 176 (50.0)149 (31.5) | 2.17 (1.64-2.89)REF | <0.001 |
| **GCS** (median; [IQR]) | 14 [3] | 0.66 (0.60-0.73) § | <0.001 |
| **ICH volume** (ml; median; [IQR]) | 10.0 [23.8] | 1.02 (1.01-1.03) ç | <0.001 |
| **Intra-ventricular extension**PresenceAbsence | 134 (54.7)191 (32.9) | 2.46 (1.81-3.34)REF | <0.001 |
| **ICH location**DeepLobarInfratentorial | 162 (39.6)132 (37.9)31 (45.6) | REF0.93 (0.69-1.25)1.28 (0.76-2.14) | 0.6370.353 |
| **Arterial Hypertension**PresenceAbsence | 239 (43.1)86 (31.9) | 1.62 (1.19-2.20)REF | 0.002 |
| **Diabetes mellitus**PresenceAbsence | 79 (52.3)246 (36.5) | 1.91 (1.34-2.72)REF | <0.001 |
| **Anticoagulant drug**YesNo | 151 (44.3)174 (36.0) | 1.42 (1.07-1.88)REF | 0.016 |
| **Pre-ICH mRS >2**Yes No | 81 (68.6)244 (34.5) | 4.15 (2.73-6.31)REF | <0.001 |
| **Neurosurgery** Yes No  | 12 (48.0)313 (39.12) | 1.44 (0.65-3.19)REF | 0.371 |
| **Blood Pressure lowering treatment**Yes No  | 75 (43.1)250 (38.4) | 1.22 (0.87-1.71)REF | 0.260 |
| *\* per year increase* *§ per point decrease**ç per ml increase**GCS, Glasgow Coma Scale; ICH, intracranial hemorrhage; ITU, intensive treatment unit; mRS, modified Rankin Scale; OR, odds ratio; CI, confidence interval* |

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| **Table 3.** Multivariate analysis for association between clinical and radiological variables and poor mRS (>3) at 6 months |
|  | **OR** | **95% Confidence Interval** | **P value** |
| **Critical Care** | 2.43 | 1.36-4.35 | 0.003 |
| **Age** | 1.06\* | 1.05-1.08 | <0.001 |
| **Glasgow Coma Scale**  | 0.72§ | 0.65-0.81 | <0.001 |
| **ICH volume** | 1.01ç | 1.00-1.02 | 0.033 |
| **Intra-ventricular extension** | 1.83 | 1.27-2.62 | 0.001 |
| **Female gender** | 1.65 | 1.18-2.31 | 0.003 |
| **Arterial hypertension** | 1.26 | 0.88-1.82 | 0.212 |
| **Diabetes mellitus** | 2.15 | 1.40-3.30 | <0.001 |
| **Anticoagulant drug** | 0.94 | 0.67-1.33 | 0.739 |
| **Pre-ICH mRS >2** | 2.95 | 1.84-4.74 | <0.001 |
| *\* per year increase* *§ per point decrease**ç per ml increase**GCS, Glasgow Coma Scale; ICH, intracranial hemorrhage; mRS, modified Rankin Scale; OR, odds ratio* |

**Appendix**

CROMIS-2 collaborators: Louise Shaw, MD, Jane Sword, MD, Azlisham Mohd Nor, MD, Pankaj Sharma, PhD, Roland Veltkamp, MD, Deborah Kelly, MD, Frances Harrington, MD, Marc Randall, MD, Matthew Smith, MD, Karim Mahawish, MD, Abduelbaset Elmarim, MD, Bernard Esisi, MD, Claire Cullen, MD, Arumug Nallasivam, MD, Christopher Price, MD, Adrian Barry, MD, Christine Roffe, MD, John Coyle, MD, Ahamad Hassan, MD, Caroline Lovelock, DPhil, Jonathan Birns, MD, David Cohen, MD, L. Sekaran, MD, Adrian Parry-Jones, PhD, Anthea Parry, MD, David Hargroves, MD, Harald Proschel, MD, Prabel Datta, MD, Khaled Darawil, MD, Aravindakshan Manoj, MD, Mathew Burn, MD, Chris Patterson, MD, Elio Giallombardo, MD, Nigel Smyth, MD, Syed Mansoor, MD, Ijaz Anwar, MD, Rachel Marsh, MD, Sissi Ispoglou, MD, Dinesh Chadha, MD, Mathuri Prabhakaran, MD, Sanjeevikumar Meenakishundaram, MD, Janice O’Connell, MD, Jon Scott, MD, Vinodh Krishnamurthy, MD, Prasanna Aghoram, MD, Michael McCormick, MD, Paul O’Mahony, MD, Martin Cooper, MD, Lillian Choy, MD, Peter Wilkinson, MD, Simon Leach, MD, Sarah Caine, MD, Ilse Burger, MD, Gunaratam Gunathilagan, MD, Paul Guyler, MD, Hedley Emsley, MD, Michelle Davis, MD, Dulka Manawadu, MD, Kath Pasco, MD, Maam Mamun, MD, Robert Luder, MD, Mahmud Sajid, MD, Ijaz Anwar, MD, James Okwera, MD, Julie Staals, PhD, Elizabeth Warburton, MD, Kari Saastamoinen, MD, Timothy England, MD, Janet Putterill, MD, Enrico Flossman, MD, Michael Power, MD, Krishna Dani, MD, David Mangion, MD, Appu Suman, MD, John Corrigan, MD, Enas Lawrence, MD, and Djamil Vahidassr, MD