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Heterogeneity of luminal breast cancer characterised by immunohistochemical expression of basal markers

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Background: Luminal A breast cancer defined as hormone receptor positive and human epidermal growth factor receptor 2 (HER2) negative is known to be heterogeneous. Previous study showed that luminal A tumours with the expression of basal markers ((cytokeratin (CK) 5 or CK5/6) or epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR)) were associated with poorer prognosis compared with those that stained negative for basal markers. Prompted by this study, we assessed whether tumour characteristics and risk factors differed by basal marker status within luminal A tumours.

Methods: We pooled 5040 luminal A cases defined by immunohistochemistry (4490 basal-negative ((CK5 (or CK5/6)) − and EGFR −) and 550 basal-positive ((CK5 (or CK5/6 +)) or EGFR +)) from eight studies participating in the Breast Cancer Association Consortium. Case–case comparison was performed using unconditional logistic regression.

Results: Tumour characteristics and risk factors did not vary significantly by the expression of basal markers, although results suggested that basal-positive luminal tumours tended to be smaller and node negative, and were more common in women with a positive family history and lower body mass index.

Conclusions: Most established breast cancer risk factors were similar in basal-positive and basal-negative luminal A tumours. The non-significant but suggestive differences in tumour features and family history warrant further investigations.

Breast cancer can be classified into several molecular subtypes based on gene expression profiling analyses (Perou *et al*, 2000; Sorlie *et al*, 2001), which can be approximated with the use of key immunohistochemical (IHC) markers, including estrogen receptor (ER), progesterone receptor (PR), human epidermal growth factor 2 (HER2), and basal markers such as epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR), cytokeratin 5 (CK5) or cytokeratin 5/6 (CK5/6). In general, well-known breast cancer hormonal and lifestyle risk factors, such as early age at menarche, late age at first birth, nulliparity, prolonged interval between menarche and age at first birth, and postmenopausal obesity showed stronger associations with ER-positive (luminal) subtypes (Yang *et al*, 2011; Anderson *et al*, 2014). In contrast, these factors showed either a lack of association or associations in the opposite direction for ER-negative (non-luminal) tumours. For example, parity and premenopausal obesity were protective for luminal cancers but associated with increased risk for non-luminal tumours, particularly triple-negative breast cancer (TNBC: ER − /PR − /HER2 − ; Millikan *et al*, 2008; Phipps *et al*, 2011). We have previously shown that risk factor associations differed most strikingly between luminal A (ER + or PR + /HER2 −) and core-basal phenotype (CBP: TNBC expressing (CK5 or CK5/6) or EGFR), suggesting that these two subtypes may develop from etiologically different pathways (Yang *et al*, 2011).

Experimental and clinical studies suggest more complex layers of heterogeneity within major breast cancer subtypes (Perou *et al*, 2000; Sotiriou *et al*, 2003; Colleoni *et al*, 2012; Ali *et al*, 2014). In particular, luminal cancers demonstrated substantial variability in molecular characteristics (Cancer Genome Atlas Network, 2012) and clinical behaviour, including responsiveness to endocrine treatment (Ciriello *et al*, 2013; Howell, 2013; Ignatiadis and Sotiriou, 2013). In line with this, in a recent large pooled analysis including > 10 000 invasive breast cancer cases, Blows *et al*, 2010 showed that luminal A tumours expressing basal markers ((CK5 or CK5/6) or EGFR, luminal A basal-positive) had worse prognosis than luminal A tumours that were negative for basal markers (luminal A basal-negative). However, to our knowledge, there have been no reports on etiological heterogeneity within luminal A tumours so far.

To assess whether luminal A basal-positive tumours (ER + or PR + /HER2 − /basal markers +) represent a distinct disease entity from an etiologic perspective, we pooled individual data for 5040 luminal A breast cancer cases contributed by eight studies participating in the Breast Cancer Association Consortium (BCAC), with risk factor information and expression status for ER, PR, HER2, and basal markers. The goal of this study was to examine whether tumour characteristics and risk factors of luminal A basal-positive tumours are different from those of luminal A basal-negative tumours (ER + or PR + /HER2 − /basal markers −).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study participants. Among studies participating in the BCAC (Yang *et al*, 2011), eight studies that had IHC data on ER (and/or PR), HER2, and basal markers (CK5 (or CK5/6) and/or EGFR) as well as breast cancer risk factor information were eligible for inclusion. Study details are summarised in Supplementary Table 1. These include four population-based studies (Kuopio Breast Cancer Project (KBCP), Melbourne Collaborative Cohort Study (MCCS), Nurses' Health Study (NHS), and NCI's Polish Breast Cancer Study (PBCS)) and four hospital-based case-control studies or studies of mixed design (Helsinki Breast Cancer Study (HEBCS), Mayo Clinic Breast Cancer Study (MCBCS), Sheffield Breast Cancer Study (SBCS), and Study of Epidemiology and Risk factors in Cancer Heredity (SEARCH)). As the goal of our analysis was to determine whether tumour characteristics and risk factors differed by basal marker status within luminal tumours, we restricted the analysis to 5040 luminal A cases (ER + or PR + /HER2 −) that were known to express or not to express basal markers (CK5 (or CK5/6) or EGFR) (Table 1). Study participants were recruited under protocols approved by the institutional review board at each institution and all subjects provided written informed consent.

Tumour marker assessment and subtype classification. ER, PR, and HER2 status were primarily extracted from medical records. Accordingly, the source of tumour marker data and definition of positivity for each marker varied across studies (Supplementary Table 2). Among 5040 luminal A cases defined based on medical records for ER and PR, centralised quantitative scores for ER or PR status obtained through automated imaging analysis of tissue microarrays were available for 3702 participants (Supplementary Table 3). More than 99% of luminal A cases ($n = 3670/3072$) had tumours with ⩾1% cells and 97% ($n = 3592/3072$) with ⩾10% tumour cells stained positive for either ER or PR, respectively. Given the high concordance of clinical data and centralised measurements for ER and PR, we used clinical data for these markers in the main analyses because they were available for more cases. Data for CK5 (or CK5/6) and EGFR status were obtained from centralised visual scoring of tissue microarray slides by pathologists. Expression was determined to be positive if > 10% tumour cells were stained. When the proportion of positive cells

Table 1. Description of participating studies and distribution of tumour subtypes by study

Study (abbreviation)	Study design	Total	Luminal A basal-negative	Luminal A basal-positive	HR+/HER2+	HR−/HER2+	CBP	5-NP	Missing
Study of Epidemiology and Risk factors in Cancer Heredity (SEARCH)	Case-control study	3096	1791 (67.7)	196 (7.4)	198 (7.5)	111 (4.2)	176 (6.7)	173 (6.5)	451
NCI Polish Breast Cancer Study (PBCS)	Case-control study	1342	768 (58.9)	57 (4.4)	115 (8.8)	119 (9.1)	116 (8.9)	128 (9.8)	39
Helsinki Breast Cancer Study (HEBCS)	Hospital-based case-control study & additional familial cases	1067	625 (63.2)	87 (8.8)	95 (9.6)	53 (5.4)	77 (7.8)	52 (5.3)	78
Melbourne Collaborative Cohort Study (MCCS)	Prospective cohort study	796	539 (67.8)	23 (2.9)	86 (10.8)	40 (5.0)	75 (9.4)	32 (4.0)	1
Kuopio Breast Cancer Project (KBCP)	Prospective clinical cohort	427	232 (62.7)	42 (11.4)	21 (5.7)	26 (7.0)	19 (5.1)	30 (8.1)	57
Mayo Clinic Breast Cancer Study (MCBCS)	Hospital-based case-control study	422	189 (58.0)	53 (16.3)	27 (8.3)	10 (3.1)	42 (12.9)	5 (1.5)	96
Sheffield Breast Cancer Study (SBCS)	Hospital-based case-control study	358	176 (53.8)	61 (18.7)	18 (5.5)	11 (3.4)	41 (12.5)	20 (6.1)	31
Nurses' Health Study (NHS)	Prospective cohort study: nested case-control study	349	170 (50.0)	31 (9.1)	72 (21.2)	14 (4.1)	32 (9.4)	21 (6.2)	9
Total	—	7857	4490 (63.3)	550 (7.8)	632 (8.9)	384 (5.4)	578 (8.2)	461 (6.5)	762

Luminal A basal-negative = ER+ or PR+/HER2−/(CK5 or CK5/6)−/EGFR−; luminal A basal-positive = ER+ or PR+/HER2−/(CK5 or CK5/6)+ or EGFR+; HR+/HER2+ = ER+ or PR+/HER2+; HR−/HER2+ = ER−/PR−/HER2+; Core-basal phenotype (CBP) = ER−/PR−/HER2−/(CK5 or CK5/6)+ or EGFR+; 5-NP(negative phenotype) = ER−/PR−/HER2−/(CK5 or CK5/6)−/EGFR−.

was missing, positivity was defined based on the intensity score ($\geqslant 2$ as positive).

The number of cases in each study by marker status is presented in Supplementary Table 4. In the current study, we focused on two subtypes within luminal A tumours: basal-negative (ER+ or PR+/HER2−/(CK5 (or CK5/6))−/EGFR−) and basal-positive (ER+ or PR+/HER2−/(CK5 (or CK5/6))+ or EGFR+).

Breast cancer risk factors. The collection of information on tumour characteristics and risk factors for BCAC studies has been previously described (Yang *et al*, 2011). Briefly, each study collected information on one or more of the following factors: family history of breast cancer in first-degree relatives, age at menarche, age at menopause, age at first full-term pregnancy, parity (never/ever), number of children, breast feeding (never/ever), and body mass index (BMI) at baseline (MCCS and KBCP) or at the time of diagnosis (all others). NHS was not included in risk factor analysis owing to the lack of data.

Statistical analyses. We compared the distribution of tumour characteristics and risk factors between luminal A basal-negative and basal-positive subtypes using unconditional logistic regression with luminal A basal-negative subtype as the reference group. Tumour characteristics included histology (ductal, lobular, other), grade (well, moderately, poorly differentiated), size ($\leqslant 2$ cm, >2 cm), and axillary node status (negative, positive). Breast cancer risk factors included family history of breast cancer among first-degree relatives (present, absent), age at menarche ($\leqslant 12$, 13–14, >14 years), parity (parous, nulliparous), and BMI (<25, 25–30, $\geqslant 30\,\mathrm{kg\,m^{-2}}$ or per 5 unit of increase); and in analyses restricted to parous women included age at first full-term birth (<20, 20–24, 25–29, $\geqslant 30$ years), number of full-term pregnancies (1, 2, $\geqslant 3$), and breast feeding (ever, never). Multivariable models were used in all analyses to control for age (10-year frequency), study, other tumour characteristics and risk factors. Given that risk associated with BMI is known to vary by menopausal status, we stratified the BMI analysis by menopausal status. We used age groups (<50 and $\geqslant 50$ years) as a surrogate for menopausal status to maximise power. A sensitivity analysis using known menopausal status yielded similar results. Between-study heterogeneity was assessed with I^2 statistics using study-specific odds ratio (ORs) and 95% confidence intervals (CIs). Analyses were conducted using SAS (version 9.3; SAS Institute, Cary, NC, USA) or Stata/SE (version 11.2; StataCorp LP, College Station, TX, USA).

RESULTS

Among all 7857 invasive breast cancer cases in the 8 studies, 63.3% ($n=4490$) and 7.8% ($n=550$) were classified as luminal A basal-negative and luminal A basal-positive subtype, respectively (Table 1). Mean age at diagnosis was not significantly different between the two subtypes, although women with luminal A basal-positive tumours were diagnosed less frequently after 60 years compared with the women with luminal A basal-negative tumours (Table 2). Compared with the luminal A basal-negative tumours, basal-positive tumours were more likely to be smaller ($OR_{>2\ cm\ vs\ \leqslant 2\ cm}=0.83$; 95% CI = 0.67–1.03; $P=0.09$; $I^2=0\%$) and negative for axillary nodes (OR = 0.83; 95% CI = 0.67–1.02; $P=0.08$; $I^2=0\%$), however, the differences were not statistically significant. The association with tumour grade did not follow a logical trend, with luminal A basal-positive tumours showing a lower frequency of moderately differentiated tumours (OR = 0.75; 95% CI = 0.60–0.94; $P=0.01$), but a higher frequency of poorly differentiated tumours (OR = 1.13; 95% CI = 0.85–1.50; $P=0.42$) compared with luminal A basal-negative tumours (Table 2). Study heterogeneity was not significant in the former ($I^2=10.2\%$; $P=0.35$) but was significant in the latter association ($I^2=63.2\%$; $P=0.01$).

Compared with basal-negative cases, cases with luminal A basal-positive tumours were more likely to have a positive family history (OR = 1.27; 95% CI = 0.99–1.63; $P=0.06$; $I^2=1.1\%$; Table 3) particularly among younger (<50 years) women (OR = 1.81; 95% CI = 1.16–2.82; $P=0.009$). In addition, basal-positive cases tended to have lower BMI ($OR_{per\ 5\ unit}=0.90$; 95% CI = 0.81–1.01, $P=0.07$; $I^2=0.0\%$) especially among older ($\geqslant 50$ years) women

Table 2. Comparison of tumour characteristics between luminal A basal-negative and basal-positive subtypes

	Basal-negative ($n=4490$)		Basal-positive ($n=550$)			
	n	%	*n*	%	OR (95% CI)[a]	*P-value*
Age, years (mean, s.d.)	56.6 (10.8)		56.3 (11.4)			0.66[b]
<40	207	4.6	31	5.6	1 (reference)	
40–49	1024	22.8	127	23.1	0.90 (0.59–1.38)	0.63
50–59	1504	33.5	187	34.0	0.91 (0.60–1.38)	0.65
⩾60	1755	39.1	205	37.3	0.79 (0.52–1.21)	0.28
P_{trend}	—	—	—	—	0.91 (0.82–1.02)	0.10
Tumour histology						
Ductal	2994	72.6	376	74.6	1 (reference)	—
Lobular	807	19.6	94	18.7	1.08 (0.84–1.39)	0.54
Other	323	7.8	34	6.8	0.89 (0.61–1.30)	0.55
Missing	366	—	46		—	—
Tumour grade						
Well differentiated	1113	27.1	160	32.0	1 (reference)	—
Moderately differentiated	2318	56.4	240	48.0	0.75 (0.60–0.94)	0.01
Poorly differentiated	676	16.5	100	20.0	1.13 (0.85–1.50)	0.42
Missing	383	—	50	—	—	—
P_{trend}	—	—	—	—	1.04 (0.90–1.22)	0.57
Tumour size						
⩽2 cm	2798	65.3	362	69.8	1 (reference)	—
>2 cm	1488	34.7	157	30.3	0.83 (0.67–1.03)	0.09
Missing	204	—	31	—	—	—
Axillary node status						
Negative	2523	61.7	332	66.5	1 (reference)	—
Positive	1565	38.3	167	33.5	0.83 (0.67–1.02)	0.08
Missing	402	—	51	—	—	—

Abbreviations: CI = confidence interval; OR = odds ratio.
[a]Odds ratios (95% CI) for being basal-positive cases were estimated with adjustment for age (10-year category), tumour grade, histology, tumour size, axillary node status and study.
[b]Student's *t*-test was used to compare the distribution of continuous variable.

($OR_{per\ 5\ unit}=0.89$; 95% CI = 0.79–1.01, $P=0.07$; $I^2=15.5\%$) compared with basal-negative cases, but the differences were weak and the test of interaction by age group did not reach nominal significance ($P<0.05$). Other risk factors did not differ significantly between the two subtypes.

To reduce the impact of potential subtype misclassification, we conducted a sensitivity analysis by restricting our analyses to cases showing ER expression in ⩾10% and PR expression in ⩾20% tumour cells. Among 3015 basal-negative and 366 basal-positive cases with ER and PR percentage data available, 2372 (79%) basal-negative and 299 (82%) basal-positive cases were included in the sensitivity analysis. The only difference we observed was that luminal A basal-positive tumours now had a similar, rather than a higher, proportion of poorly differentiated tumours to luminal A basal-negative tumours. ORs for other tumour characteristics and risk factors did not change substantially (Supplementary Table 5).

DISCUSSION

In a previous BCAC analysis (Blows *et al*, 2010), we showed that all-cause mortality among cases with luminal A basal-positive tumours was slightly but significantly higher than that of cases with luminal A basal-negative tumours, and the difference was persistent up to 15 years after diagnosis. Similar but non-significant difference in survival by basal marker expression (adjusted hazard ratio = $1.20_{\text{basal-positive } vs \text{ basal-negative}}$; 95% CI = 0.69–2.08, $P=0.51$) was observed in our study when we analysed a subset of cases (1245 luminal A cases; 1124 basal-negative cases, and 121 basal-positive cases) with the follow-up data available. Interestingly, luminal A basal-positive tumours were not associated with more aggressive features, rather, they tended to be less aggressive (smaller, lower grade, and node negative) compared with basal-negative tumours.

The apparent discrepancy between less aggressive tumour features and poorer prognosis in basal-positive cases might be explained by different responses to endocrine therapy among cases with luminal tumours. Previous studies using luminal tumour xenografts identified a subpopulation of ER-PR-CK5+ cells that were resistant to endocrine therapies (Horwitz *et al*, 2008); when ER+ tumours with ER-PR-CK5+ cells were treated with 17β-estradiol plus anti-estrogens tamoxifen or fulvestrant, the number of CK5+ cells in post compared with pre-treatment tumours coupled with decreased expression of ER and increased expression of CK5 (Kabos *et al*, 2011). Studies with detailed pathology data incorporating cellular subpopulation, as well as treatment regimens with long-term follow-up are needed to definitively address this question.

Known breast cancer risk factors did not appear to vary significantly by basal marker expression within luminal A tumours, although we observed weak associations between basal-positive tumours and higher frequency of positive family history especially among younger women and lower prevalence of obesity. The higher frequency of slim women with luminal A basal-positive tumours might be also related to smaller tumour size of luminal A basal-positive tumours as we observed a significant correlation between tumour size and BMI among our study subjects. Indeed, when we adjusted for BMI, the association between luminal A basal-positive subtype and smaller tumour size was attenuated (OR = 0.87; 95% CI = 0.69–1.09; $P=0.22$). This finding is consistent with previous reports that obese breast cancer patients had larger tumours and higher rates of lymph node metastases (Ewertz *et al*, 2011; Haakinson *et al*, 2012).

Our study has limitations. Although it is one of the largest consortium studies with breast tumour subtype information and risk factor data collected, statistical power was limited to assess risk factors in uncommon subtypes especially when controlling for potential confounding factors such as breastfeeding, menopausal

Table 3. Comparison of risk factors between luminal A basal-negative and basal-positive subtypes

	Basal-negative ($n=4490$)		Basal-positive ($n=550$)			
	n	%	*n*	%	OR (95% CI)[a]	*P-value*
Age, years (mean, s.d.)	56.6 (10.8)		56.3 (11.4)		—	0.66[b]
Family history of breast cancer						
Absent	2859	78.7	345	73.4	1 (reference)	—
Present	776	21.4	125	26.6	1.27 (0.99–1.63)	0.06
Missing	855	—	80	—	—	—
Age at menarche						
⩽12	1421	36.6	168	36.7	1 (reference)	—
13–14	1751	45.1	200	43.7	0.97 (0.78–1.22)	0.82
>14	711	18.3	90	19.7	1.05 (0.79–1.39)	0.75
Missing	607	—	92	—	—	—
P_{trend}	—	—	—	—	1.02 (0.88–1.17)	0.82
Parity						
Nulliparous	659	15.9	69	13.9	1 (reference)	—
Parous	3490	84.1	429	86.1	1.17 (0.89–1.54)	0.25
Missing	341	—	52	—	—	—
Age at first full-term pregnancy[c]						
<20	362	11.2	47	12.2	1 (reference)	—
20–24	1403	43.2	159	41.4	0.82 (0.57–1.17)	0.27
25–29	969	29.9	115	30.0	0.85 (0.59–1.24)	0.41
⩾30	512	15.8	63	16.4	0.90 (0.59–1.38)	0.63
Missing	244	—	45	—	—	—
P_{trend}	—	—	—	—	0.99 (0.87–1.12)	0.85
Number of live births[c]						
1	727	20.8	76	17.7	1 (reference)	—
2	1583	45.4	209	48.7	1.28 (0.96–1.72)	0.09
⩾3	1180	33.8	144	33.6	1.09 (0.79–1.52)	0.59
P_{trend}	—	—	—	—	1.00 (0.84–1.18)	0.97
Breast feeding[c]						
Never	475	17.9	53	17.6	1 (reference)	—
Ever	2181	82.1	248	82.4	1.11 (0.79–1.55)	0.54
P_{trend}	834	—	128	—	—	—
Body mass index (cm m^{-2})						
Overall						
Mean, s.d.	26.6 (5.1)	—	26.0 (4.9)	—	0.02[b]	—
<25	1701	43.6	215	47.4	1 (reference)	—
25–30	1355	34.7	157	34.6	0.92 (0.74–1.16)	0.50
⩾30	847	21.7	82	18.1	0.78 (0.59–1.03)	0.08
Missing	587	—	96	—	—	—
Per 5 unit	—	—	—	—	0.90 (0.81–1.01)	0.07
Premenopausal (age <50)						
Mean, s.d.	25.1 (4.80)	—	24.9 (4.66)	—	0.63[b]	—
<25	631	57.7	79	57.3	1 (reference)	—
25–30	323	29.6	44	31.9	1.12 (0.75–1.69)	0.57
⩾30	139	12.7	15	10.9	0.78 (0.42–1.44)	0.43
Missing	138	—	20	—	—	—
Per 5 unit	—	—	—	—	0.94 (0.77–1.15)	0.56
Postmenopausal (age ⩾50)						
Mean, s.d.	27.2 (5.10)	—	26.5 (4.89)	—	0.03[b]	—
<25	1070	38.1	136	43.0	1 (reference)	—
25–30	1032	36.7	113	35.8	0.89 (0.67–1.18)	0.41
⩾30	708	25.2	67	21.2	0.81 (0.58–1.12)	0.20
Missing	449	—	76	—	—	—
Per 5 unit	—	—	—	—	0.89 (0.79–1.01)	0.07

Abbreviations: CI = confidence interval; OR = odds ratio.

[a]Odds ratios (95% CI) for being basal-positive cases were estimated with adjustment for age (10-year categories), family history of breast cancer, age at menarche, parity, and BMI.

[b]Student's *t*-test was used to compare the distribution of continuous variables.

[c]Parous women only; adjusted for age (10-year categories), family history of breast cancer, age at menarche, parity, age at first full-term pregnancy, number of live births, breastfeeding, BMI, and study.

hormone therapy usage, and tumour size. As expected for any analysis pooling data from multiple studies, there were variations in study populations, study designs, data collection methods, and marker measurement, which may cause study heterogeneity and subtype misclassification. However, we found no significant heterogeneity across studies at least for the associations in risk factors we analysed. In addition, the proportions of CBP (8.5%) and 5-NP (6.3%) subtypes were also comparable to those reported previously (Cheang *et al*, 2008; Blows *et al*, 2010; Yang *et al*, 2011; Liu *et al*, 2012). Of note, although we used centralised

measurement for CK5/6 and EGFR expression, we used ER, PR, and HER2 status retrieved from clinical records in each study instead of centralised data to maximise the power of our study. Accordingly, IHC methods and cut-point for positivity varied substantially among studies. However, we observed high concordance for ER and PR status between clinical records and centralised quantitative measurements among a subset of study subjects with both data available. Further, the overall proportions of positivity for these five markers (ER, 78.0%; PR, 64.2%; HER2, 14.5%; CK5/6, 13.5%; EGFR, 12.8%) were generally consistent with what was reported in previous studies (El-Rehim *et al*, 2004; Carey *et al*, 2006; Rakha *et al*, 2006; Cheang *et al*, 2008; Liu *et al*, 2012). Finally, information on proliferation marker (such as Ki-67) was not available for most studies, which made the accurate classification of real luminal A tumours a challenge. However, results from the sensitivity analysis restricting to cases with high ER and PR expression levels using centralised data did not change results significantly, suggesting that the potential subtype misclassification caused by study heterogeneity or marker measurement and scoring did not significantly influence our conclusion.

In conclusion, we found that tumour characteristics and known risk factors were generally similar in basal-positive and basal-negative luminal A tumours. The small differences in tumour features and family history between the two luminal A subtypes warrant further investigations in future studies with larger number of subjects and detailed annotation of subtype and risk factor information.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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