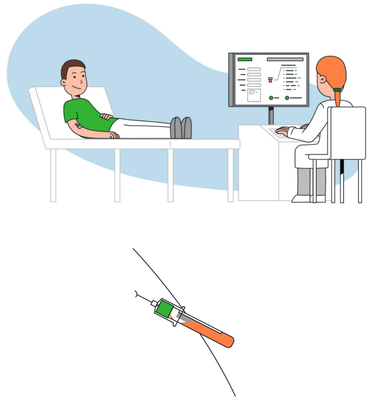
Patients and their active role in COVID-19 research - The COVID-19 Convalescent Cohort

Perz V; Kral S; Zardoya-Laguardia P; Guelly C;
Biobank Graz
Medical University of Graz, Austria

Introduction

With the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for samples from COVID-19 convalescents became tremendous. At the same time, parts of the population and especially people that have already suffered and recovered from COVID-19 have had the strong desire to contribute to fighting this disease. Biobank Graz in cooperation with several clinical departments took the initiative to collect, process and store biospecimen from COVID-19 convalescents in frame of a cohort study for COVID-19 related research.



Methods

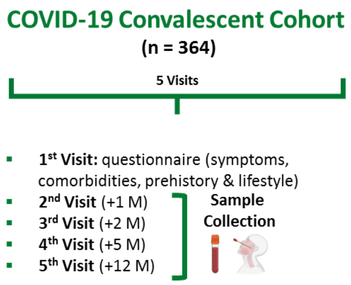


Fig. 1: Overview study cohort

Volunteers who recovered from a SARS-CoV-2 infection were recruited through advertisements in newspapers, on social media platforms and the Med Uni Graz website. Participants were invited to five consecutive visits (Fig.1), where biospecimen were collected. Data based on lifestyle, symptoms and comorbidities were obtained via a questionnaire, which was completed/answered in presence of qualified medical stuff. All participants have signed a study specific and the standard Biobank Graz informed consent.

Results

More than 360 volunteers (age: ≥18; avg. age 41years) participated in the study, with a dropout rate of only 3% during the first four visits (6 months). In return Biobank Graz notified participants about their antibody levels. The workflow of the routine procedure after all visits is presented in Fig. 2.

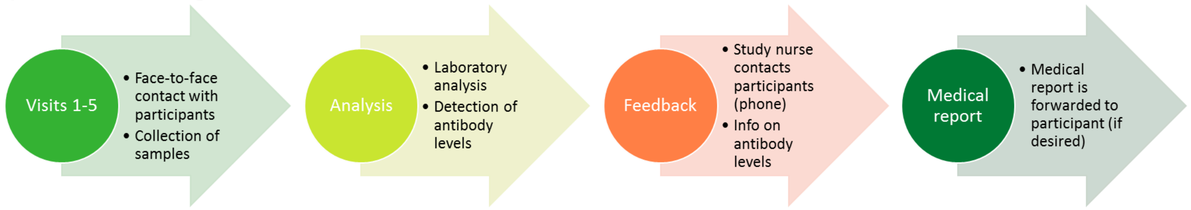


Fig. 2: Work flow of sample collection and feedback loop

Current projects conducted with samples from COVID-19 convalescents are represented on the webpage of Biobank Graz in order to meet the participant's wish to be informed about the usage of their specimens (https://biobank.medunigraz.at/en/for-patients).

We observed that many participants were interested in the scientific results obtained with the help of their samples and that they really appreciated to have a direct contact person that helps out with urgent questions. For that reason the publication of the first results was published as open access article in order to provide the paper to all interested participants. Moreover, we sent the article in combination with a short info letter explaining these results in German language via Email to the participants. We obtained exclusively positive feedback from the participants, highly appreciating this proactive measure (Fig. 3.).

Fig. 3: Measures taken to inform study participants about e.g. current research projects, latest results, etc.

Conclusion

Proactive involvement and information of participants on study results is a highly appreciated measure and a promising way to increase the motivation of study participants to keep the drop-out rate in longitudinal studies low. But it is also an important educational measure to create awareness for biobanking in the public and an understanding for the contribution of Biobanks in health research. Last but not least, this study is the perfect example of civic engagement during this ongoing pandemic and shows that people are highly motivated to support research.

References: Kral S, Banfi C, Niedrist T, Sareban N, Guelly C, Kriegl L, et al. Long-lasting immune response to a mild course of PCR-confirmed SARS-CoV-2 infection: A cohort study. J Infect 2021 Aug 22.

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