Initial combination therapy with ambrisentan + tadalafil on pulmonary arterial hypertension–related hospitalization in the AMBITION trial

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BACKGROUND: In the randomized, double-blind, event-driven AMBITION study, initial combination therapy with ambrisentan and tadalafil was associated with a 50% reduction in risk of clinical failure (first occurrence of all-cause death, hospitalization for worsening pulmonary arterial hypertension [PAH], disease progression, or unsatisfactory long-term clinical response) vs pooled monotherapy. These results were primarily driven by a reduction in PAH-related hospitalization in the combination therapy group, although a significant effect was not observed in a post-hoc analysis of all-cause hospitalization.

METHODS: The effect of initial combination therapy with ambrisentan and tadalafil in AMBITION was further explored to study PAH-related hospitalization, which was not reported in the primary publication.

RESULTS: Initial combination therapy was associated with a 63% reduction in risk of PAH-related hospitalization when compared with pooled monotherapy (hazard ratio [HR] 0.372, 95% confidence interval [CI] 0.217 to 0.639, p = 0.0002). For every 9 patients treated with combination therapy vs monotherapy, 1 PAH-related hospitalization could be prevented over a 1-year period. Serious adverse events leading to hospitalization, not necessarily PAH-related, occurred in 87 of 253 (34%) and 89 of 247 (36%) of patients on combination therapy and pooled monotherapy, respectively (post-hoc summary).

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Pulmonary arterial hypertension (PAH) is a severe condition associated with high rates of mortality and hospitalization. Management strategies for PAH have evolved, moving from monotherapy to sequential combination therapy in case of inadequate clinical response. More recently, clinical experience showed favorable trends for initial combination therapy over monotherapy in uncontrolled or small controlled studies. Such a strategy is supported by the potential benefit of targeting multiple pathways at the same time.

Initial combination therapy, compared with initial monotherapy, was studied with ambrisentan, an endothelin type A receptor antagonist, and tadalafil, a phosphodiesterase-5 inhibitor, in the phase 3/4, randomized, double-blind, multicenter, active-controlled, event-driven AMBITION study (NCT01178073). As reported in the primary publication, initial combination therapy was associated with a 50% reduction in the risk of clinical failure (first occurrence of all-cause death, hospitalization for worsening PAH, disease progression, or unsatisfactory long-term clinical response) vs monotherapy (hazard ratio [HR] 0.502, 95% confidence interval [CI] 0.348 to 0.724, \( p = 0.0002 \)). These results were driven by a reduction in PAH-related hospitalization as a first event in the combination arm. A post-hoc analysis included in the primary publication showed no statistically significant difference between the treatment groups in rates of first all-cause hospitalization; this analysis included hospitalizations for worsening PAH and serious adverse events (SAEs) leading to hospitalizations (not necessarily related to PAH).

Hospitalizations are recognized as important endpoints in chronic heart failure and PAH trials. Therefore, the objective of this exploratory analysis of the AMBITION study was to further assess both the PAH-related hospitalization component of the pre-specified primary end-point and SAEs leading to hospitalization. Specifically, the effect of initial combination therapy with ambrisentan and tadalafil on PAH-related hospitalization was further explored, including post-hoc analysis within patient subgroups and post-hoc covariate analysis of factors potentially associated with an increased risk of PAH-related hospitalization. To expand on the data reported in the primary publication, we also present the incidence rates of all SAEs leading to hospitalization, irrespective of cause, as well as the most common investigator-reported causes (post-hoc summaries).

Methods

Study design

The design of the AMBITION study has been described previously. Patients were stratified by PAH etiology (idiopathic or heritable vs non-idiopathic) and World Health Organization functional class (WHO FC II vs III) and randomized 2:1:1 to receive combination therapy with ambrisentan and tadalafil, monotherapy with ambrisentan, or monotherapy with tadalafil. Ambrisentan was up-titrated from 5 to 10 mg at Week 8, and tadalafil was up-titrated from 20 to 40 mg at Week 4. All doses were administered once daily. Efficacy and safety were assessed at screening; randomization; Weeks 4, 8, 16, and 24, then subsequently every 12 weeks; and at the final assessment and end-of-study visits. At the investigator’s discretion, patients who had a clinical failure event and remained in the study could (in a blinded fashion) discontinue their assigned monotherapy and start combination therapy (ambrisentan and tadalafil) or they could discontinue their assigned treatment (monotherapy or combination therapy) and start prostanoid or any other locally available therapy.

Patients

Eligible patients were PAH treatment-naive adults (18 to 75 years old) with WHO FC II or III symptoms; a diagnosis of idiopathic, heritable, or non-idiopathic PAH; and mean pulmonary arterial pressure ≥25 mm Hg. All patients provided written informed consent to participate in the study.

Assessments

All reported clinical failure events were adjudicated by an independent clinical end-point committee that was blinded to treatment assignment and investigator. Hospitalization for worsening PAH (i.e., PAH-related hospitalization) was a component of the composite primary end-point of time from randomization to first clinical failure event. PAH-related hospitalization was defined as any hospitalization for worsening PAH, lung or heart/lung transplant, atrial septostomy, or initiation of parenteral prostanoid therapy. Worsening PAH was defined as worsening breathlessness, fluid retention, angina, or syncope supported by evidence from physical examination, routine blood tests, electrocardiogram, and chest radiography; deterioration in exercise performance requiring urgent investigation and treatment; or disease progression (≥15% decrease from baseline in 6-minute walk distance combined with WHO FC III or IV symptoms at 2 consecutive post-baseline clinic visits separated by ≥14 days). Time to first hospitalization for worsening PAH was a prespecified supportive analysis of the primary end-point. Data for length of hospital stay were not collected.
Herein we report SAEs requiring hospitalization or prolongation of existing hospitalization, summarized by system organ class and preferred term. SAEs that occurred >30 days after the last dose of study drug and, for this analysis, those that occurred after a clinical failure event and while the patient was on blinded combination therapy, were not included. SAEs were reviewed by the chair of the clinical end-point committee and, if there was suspicion of a hospitalization being PAH-related, a dossier was prepared and adjudicated by the full clinical end-point committee.

As PAH-related hospitalizations constituting a primary end-point event were reported independently of SAE hospitalizations, there may be overlap in the numbers reported between the two. A PAH-related hospitalization, as a component of the composite primary end-point, was not necessarily an SAE hospitalization. Similarly, an SAE hospitalization was not necessarily a primary end-point event (e.g., due to adjudication); also, multiple SAEs may have contributed to a single hospitalization.

### Statistical analyses

The primary efficacy comparison was between combination therapy and pooled monotherapy. Comparisons between combination therapy and individual monotherapies were performed only if the primary comparison was statistically significant. The analyses herein were performed on the primary analysis data set, which is the same as that used in the primary publication. Results for the modified intention-to-treat population are summarized in the Supplementary Material (available online at www.jhlonline.org/). The pre-specified time to first hospitalization for worsening PAH treatment difference was tested using the stratified log-rank test, adjusted for etiology of PAH (idiopathic/heritable PAH vs non-idiopathic PAH) and WHO FC (II vs III). A Cox proportional hazards regression model was used to calculate the HR and 95% CI. Treatment differences over time were analyzed using the Kaplan–Meier method. Post-hoc analyses were conducted by patient subgroups based on etiology of PAH (idiopathic/heritable vs non-idiopathic), baseline WHO FC (II vs III), median baseline 6-minute walk distance (<363.7 vs ≥363.7 m), geographic region (North America vs rest of world), sex, and median baseline age (<57 vs ≥57 years).

A post-hoc Cox proportional hazards covariate analysis of time to first hospitalization for worsening PAH considered the following variables for inclusion in the final model: treatment (combination vs pooled monotherapy); region (North America vs rest of world); sex; age; baseline 6-minute walk distance; baseline cardiac output; baseline right atrial pressure; baseline pulmonary vascular resistance; and log-transformed baseline N-terminal pro-brain natriuretic peptide (NT-proBNP)—all either below or above the median, using a backward elimination procedure. The stratification variables (PAH etiology and WHO FC, as just defined) were also included as covariates to investigate the significance of the (2-way) interactions effect between treatment and the 2 stratification variables, using a significance level of 10%. HRs and 95% CIs were calculated from the Cox proportional-hazards model. For censored patients, time was calculated as number of days from randomization to the final assessment visit.

### Results

#### Patients

Of 500 patients in the primary analysis set, 253 received combination therapy with ambrisentan and tadalafil, and 247 received monotherapy with either drug. Of note, approximately twice as many patients were subsequently treated with combination therapy in the pooled monotherapy arm compared with the combination therapy arm (60 [24%] vs 28 [11%]). Baseline characteristics were similar between groups.11

Total exposure to therapy was 408 patient-years for those who received combination therapy and 382 patient-years for those who received monotherapy.

### PAH-related hospitalization

**Pre-specified analysis.** As reported previously,11 initial combination therapy was associated with a statistically significant 63% reduction in the risk of hospitalization for worsening PAH, compared with pooled monotherapy, from randomization to the final assessment visit (Figure 1). PAH-related hospitalizations from randomization through final assessment visit were reported in 19 (8%) patients in the combination therapy arm and 44 (18%) patients in the pooled monotherapy arm (HR 0.372, 95% CI 0.217 to 0.639, p = 0.0002). The comparisons with the ambrisentan monotherapy group (HR 0.323, 95% CI 0.179 to 0.583, log rank p < 0.0001) and the tadalafil monotherapy group (HR 0.442, 95% CI 0.229 to 0.853, log rank p = 0.0124) were also statistically significant. Pre-specified analysis of PAH-related hospitalization from randomization through end of study showed similar findings (Table 1).

The pre-specified Kaplan–Meier probabilities of a patient having a PAH hospitalization by 1 year were 2.1% for combination therapy and 14.3% for pooled monotherapy. Therefore, for every 9 patients (1/0.0143 to 0.0211 = 8.2 patients, rounded up to 9) treated with combination therapy vs monotherapy, 1 PAH-related hospitalization could be prevented over the course of 1 year.

**Post-hoc summary.** Nineteen (8%) patients had a PAH-related hospitalization in the combination therapy group, and 5 (2%) had >1 PAH-related hospitalization (Table 2). Forty-four (18%) patients had a PAH-related hospitalization in the pooled monotherapy group, and 9 (4%) had >1 PAH-related hospitalization. Hospitalization for initiation of parenteral prostanooids and other hospitalization for worsening PAH were the most common reasons for PAH-related hospitalization. The rate of hospitalizations for worsening PAH per 100 patient-years was 4.7 with combination therapy and 11.5 in the pooled monotherapy group (Table 2). The corresponding rates of all-cause hospitalization, which were calculated post hoc using information from both the SAE and adjudicated event databases and included in the primary publication’s supplementary appendix,11 were numerically lower on combination therapy (30 events per 100 patient-years) compared with pooled monotherapy (37 events per 100 patient-years), although this was not significantly different.

Post-hoc analysis revealed that 5 of 253 (2%) patients in the combination group had hospitalizations for PAH worsening during the first year of treatment, compared with 31 of 247 (13%) in the pooled monotherapy group (Figure 2).
Post-hoc subgroup and covariate analyses

The risk of hospitalization for worsening PAH was lower with combination therapy vs pooled monotherapy in all subgroups analyzed (Figure 3). Among patients with WHO FC II symptoms at baseline, no PAH-related hospitalization occurred with combination therapy, whereas 11 (14%) patients in the pooled monotherapy group had a PAH-related hospitalization.

Factors associated with an increased risk of hospitalization for worsening PAH were: being in the pooled monotherapy group; a lower baseline 6-minute walk distance (< median = 363.7 meters); and higher baseline NT-proBNP level (log-transformed value ≥ median value of 6.912 ng/liter) (Table 3).

Post-hoc serious adverse events leading to hospitalization

The most common (≥3%) SAEs leading to hospitalization, regardless of cause, are summarized by treatment group in Table 4. The leading causes were pneumonia and worsening of PAH (each reported by 4% of patients) in the combination therapy arm, worsening of PAH (8%) and pneumonia (6%) in the ambrisentan monotherapy arm, and worsening of PAH (7%) and syncope (4%) in the tadalafil monotherapy arm.

Modified intention-to-treat population

Results for the modified intention-to-treat population were similar to those of the primary analysis set (see Tables S1 to S4 in the Supplementary Material online).

Discussion

This exploratory analysis of the AMBITION study has shown that initial combination therapy with ambrisentan and tadalafil reduced the risk of PAH-related hospitalization compared with monotherapy with either drug. From post-hoc analyses, the benefit of combination therapy in reducing the risk of PAH-related hospitalization vs pooled monotherapy was observed across all subgroups analyzed,

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**Table 1** Summary of First PAH-related Hospitalization from Randomization to End of Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Combination therapy (N = 253)</th>
<th>Pooled monotherapy (N = 247)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number (%) of patients with first PAH-related hospitalization</td>
<td>20 (8%)</td>
<td>48 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KM probability of event at 1 year (% [95% CI])</td>
<td>2.07 (0.86 to 4.91)</td>
<td>14.54 (10.55 to 19.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazard ratio (95% CI)</td>
<td>0.363 (0.215 to 0.611)</td>
<td>0.967 (0.682 to 1.371)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CI, confidence interval; KM, Kaplan–Meier; PAH, pulmonary arterial hypertension.
Table 2  Summary of Hospitalizations for Worsening PAH by Type (from Randomization to Final Assessment Visit), and Hospitalization Rate Adjusted for Exposure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Combination therapy (N = 253)</th>
<th>Pooled monotherapy (N = 247)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patients with ≥1 hospitalization for worsening PAH</td>
<td>19 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason for first hospitalization for worsening PAH</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiation of parenteral prostanoids</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atrial septostomy</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other hospitalization for worsening PAH</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-hoc summaries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number (%) of patients with:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 hospitalization for worsening PAH</td>
<td>234 (92%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 hospitalization for worsening PAH</td>
<td>14 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;1 hospitalization for worsening PAH</td>
<td>5 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total exposure (patient-years)</td>
<td>408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate of hospitalization for worsening PAH per 100 patient-years</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data expressed as number (%) or as number. PAH, pulmonary arterial hypertension.

Figure 2  Scatterplot of time to occurrence of first PAH hospitalization during (A) the entire study period (A) and the first year (B). IP, investigational product; PAH, pulmonary arterial hypertension; PVOD, pulmonary veno-occlusive disease.
Table 3 Post-hoc Covariate Analysis of Time to First Hospitalization for Worsening PAH (from Randomization to Final Assessment Visit)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable included in final model</th>
<th>Hazard ratio</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Treatment (combination vs pooled monotherapy)</td>
<td>0.323</td>
<td>0.183 to 0.568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline 6MWD ≥ vs &lt; median (363.7 m)</td>
<td>0.385</td>
<td>0.209 to 0.711</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline NT-proBNP (log-transformed) ≥ vs &lt; median (6.912 ng/liter)</td>
<td>3.216</td>
<td>1.701 to 6.079</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6MWD, 6-minute walk distance; CI, confidence interval; NT-proBNP, N-terminal pro-brain natriuretic peptide; PAH, pulmonary arterial hypertension.

* Covariate dichotomized by median.
Hospitalization for worsening PAH is common in clinical practice and associated with poor survival. In the REVEAL registry, in-hospital mortality among newly diagnosed PAH patients was almost 4-fold greater than non-PAH-related hospitalizations and 3-year post-discharge survival after first hospitalization was significantly lower for PAH-related vs non-PAH-related hospitalizations. The economic burden is substantial, with initial hospitalizations among commercially insured patients costing $46,070 and average re-admissions costing $73,066 when PAH was the principal diagnosis. The observed incidence of PAH-related hospitalization, and its associated costs and mortality, together with the lack of correlation between changes in other parameters (e.g., 6-minute walk distance, cardio-pulmonary hemodynamics) and clinical events, underscores the importance of this end-point in clinical trial designs. The cost associated with hospitalization is lower, albeit still considerable, when the principal diagnosis is something other than PAH ($43,569 for initial hospitalizations, $41,438 for average re-admissions).

The fact that rates of all-cause hospitalizations in the AMBITION study were approximately 2- to 4-fold greater than rates of PAH-related hospitalization is an important finding. In addition, there was no statistically significant difference between initial combination therapy and combined monotherapy in this post-hoc analysis. As AMBITION is the first study to assess the effects of initial oral combination therapy on outcome, there are no data available to put this observation into perspective. In the predominantly sequential approach assessed in the SERAPHIN study, the rate of all-cause hospitalizations was significantly reduced in the group receiving macitentan 10 mg. However, this effect was mainly achieved by a reduction in PAH-related hospitalizations. These findings illustrate that patients with PAH present a high rate of non-PAH-related hospitalizations that have not been fully elucidated.

It remains unknown whether treatment strategies for PAH have an impact on all-cause hospitalization and this could be addressed specifically in future studies.

An interesting finding in the current analysis is that 13% of patients in the pooled monotherapy group had PAH-related hospitalizations during the first year of treatment, compared with 2% of patients in the combination group. This finding, combined with FC II patients on combination therapy not experiencing a single hospitalization for worsening PAH during the study, suggests that the earlier a patient receives combination therapy in the disease process, the lower the risk of PAH-related hospitalization. According to the number needed to treat analysis, it is estimated that, for every 9 patients treated with combination vs monotherapy, 1 PAH-related hospitalization could be prevented over the course of 1 year.

European Union treatment guidelines for PAH (2015) recommend the use of initial monotherapy or initial combination therapy with equal weight for patients who are FC II or III. The rationale for initial combination therapy to improve long-term outcomes is based on the fact that PAH is a multi-pathway disease. Previous studies using this approach were limited by their small samples sizes and/or lack of a prospective control group. In this study, among patients who had a PAH-related hospitalization, about one third (9 combination therapy, 14 monotherapy) did not experience this as the first clinical failure event. Thus, these patients may have been receiving a treatment different from their randomized therapy at the time of the PAH-related hospitalization. Country and center variations in terms of the threshold for hospital admission and the use of parenteral therapy may also have influenced the results. Whether any of the PAH-related hospitalizations due to initiation of parenteral prostanoitid therapy were elective rather than emergent is unknown as data were not collected to address this in the AMBITION study.

In conclusion, in the AMBITION study, initial combination therapy with ambrisentan and tadalafil reduced the risk...
of hospitalization for worsening PAH by 63% compared with pooled monotherapy, although the differences observed were not statistically significant in the post-hoc analysis of the rate of all-cause hospitalization between groups. Hospitalizations were mainly due to initiation of prostacyclin therapy and worsening of PAH. Post-hoc subgroup analysis suggested that the benefit was similar across the spectrum of PAH, irrespective of etiology of PAH, baseline WHO FC, baseline 6-minute walk distance, geographic region, sex, and baseline age. Post-hoc analysis also showed that pooled monotherapy, lower baseline 6-minute walk distance, and higher baseline NT-proBNP level were associated with an overall greater risk of hospitalization for worsening PAH.

**Disclosure statement**

J-L.V. has received institutional grants from Actelion and GlaxoSmithKline; speaker fees from Actelion, Bayer, GlaxoSmithKline, Pfizer, and Sonnivie; and advisory board honoring from Actelion and Merck. N.G. has received grants and personal fees from Actelion, Bayer, GlaxoSmithKline, and Pfizer. J.A.B. has received personal fees from Actelion, Bayer, and GlaxoSmithKline, and grants from Actelion, Bayer, GlaxoSmithKline, and Pfizer. A.E.F. has received funds for the conduct of the study from the Baylor College of Medicine; honoring and travel/lodging expenses for being on the study’s steering committee; grants from Actelion, Bayer, Gilead, and United Therapeutics; personal fees from Actelion, Bayer, Gilead, Ikaria, and United Therapeutics; and non-financial support from Bayer and Novartis. H.-A.G. has received grants from Actelion, Bayer, Novartis, and Pfizer; served as a board member and consultant for Actelion, Bayer, GlaxoSmithKline, Merck, Novartis, and Pfizer; and received payments for lectures from Actelion, Bayer, Novartis, and Pfizer. M.M.H. has received personal fees from Actelion, Bayer, Gilead, GlaxoSmithKline, Merck, and Pfizer. V.V.M. has received personal fees from Actelion, Bayer, Medtronic, St. Jude Medical, Stellamed, and United Therapeutics. A.J.P. has received grants and personal fees from Actelion, Bayer, Gilead, and GlaxoSmithKline, and personal fees from United Therapeutics. O.S. has received grants and personal fees from Actelion, Bayer, Gilead, and GlaxoSmithKline. C.B. is an employee of Gilead, and has stock options in Gilead. K.L.M., a former employee of Gilead, has received stock options from the company. J.L. is an employee of GlaxoSmithKline, and has received stock options in the company. L.J.R. has received consulting fees from Actelion, Arena, Gilead, and Karos.

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**Supplementary data**

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at [https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healun.2018.11.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healun.2018.11.006).

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