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Molecular MRD status and outcome after transplantation in *NPM1* mutated AML: results from the UK NCRI AML17 study

Tracking no: BLD-2019-002959

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Abstract:

Relapse remains the most common cause of treatment failure for patients with acute myeloid leukaemia (AML) who undergo allogeneic stem cell transplantation (alloSCT) and carries a grave prognosis. Multiple studies have identified the presence of minimal residual disease (MRD) assessed by flow cytometry (FCM) prior to alloSCT as a strong predictor of relapse, but it is not clear how these findings apply to patients who test positive in molecular MRD assays which have far greater sensitivity. We analysed pre-transplant blood and bone marrow samples by reverse-transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-qPCR) in 107 patients with *NPM1* mutant AML enrolled in the UK National Cancer Research Institute (NCRI) AML17 study. After a median follow-up of 4.9 years, patients with negative, low (<200 copies / 10^5 ABL in the PB and <1000 copies in the BM) and high levels of MRD had an estimated 2y overall survival (OS) of 83%, 63% and 13% respectively (p<0.0001). Focussing on patients with low level MRD prior to alloSCT, those with *FLT3* ITD had significantly poorer outcome (hazard ratio, HR, 6.14, p=0.01). Combining these variables was highly prognostic, dividing patients into two groups with 2y OS of 17% and 82% (HR 13.2, p<0.0001). T-depletion was associated with significantly reduced survival both in the entire cohort (2y OS 56% vs 96%, HR 3.24, p=0.0005) and in MRD positive patients (2y OS 34% vs 100%, HR 3.78, p=0.003) but there was no significant effect of either conditioning regimen or donor source on outcome. Registered at ISRCTN (http://www.isrctn.com/ISRCTN55675535).

Conflict of interest: No COI declared

COI notes:

Preprint server: No;

Author contributions and disclosures: Molecular analysis and interpretation: RD, NP, JJ, AK, MR, NF, MV, AG, RG, NR, DG. Statistical analysis: RD, RH. Clinical data collection: AK, JC, MS, HBO, UMO, MD, SK, HK, DT, PM, KR, INB, MN, RD, PK, KH, DF, SA, EH, PJ, AK, RSa, RSp, AB, NR, CC. Trial co-ordination: NR, AB, SK, MD. Manuscript preparation: RD, SF, NR, RH

Non-author contributions and disclosures: Yes; Ian Thomas, Sophie Betteridge, Laura Upton, Leona Batten and Melanie Varley at the Centre for Trials Research, University of Cardiff were involved in data collection for this study. Their input was funded by a Clinical Trial Award from Cancer Research UK.

Agreement to Share Publication-Related Data and Data Sharing Statement: Publication-related data are available on reasonable request by email from the corresponding author.

Clinical trial registration information (if any): This study is registered at the ISRCTN registry, reference number 55675535 http://www.isrctn.com/ISRCTN55675535

Molecular MRD status and outcome after transplantation in *NPM1* mutated AML: results from the UK NCRI AML17 study

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Key points

Pre-transplant MRD level is highly predictive of outcome, thresholds of 200 copies / 10^5 ABL in PB and 1000 copies in BM are discriminatory.

Relapse in patients with pre-transplant MRD positivity below these levels is largely restricted to those with *FLT3* ITD.

Abstract

Relapse remains the most common cause of treatment failure for patients with acute myeloid leukaemia (AML) who undergo allogeneic stem cell transplantation (alloSCT) and carries a grave prognosis. Multiple studies have identified the presence of minimal residual disease (MRD) assessed by flow cytometry (FCM) prior to alloSCT as a strong predictor of relapse, but it is not clear how these findings apply to patients who test positive in molecular MRD assays which have far greater sensitivity.

We analysed pre-transplant blood and bone marrow samples by reverse-transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-qPCR) in 107 patients with NPM1 mutant AML enrolled in the UK National Cancer Research Institute (NCRI) AML17 study. After a median follow-up of 4.9 years, patients with negative, low (<200 copies / 105 ABL in the PB and <1000 copies in the BM) and high levels of MRD had an estimated 2y overall survival (OS) of 83%, 63% and 13% respectively (p<0.0001). Focussing on patients with low level MRD prior to alloSCT, those with FLT3 ITD had significantly poorer outcome (hazard ratio, HR, 6.14, p=0.01). Combining these variables was highly prognostic, dividing patients into two groups with 2y OS of 17% and 82% (HR 13.2, p<0.0001).

T-depletion was associated with significantly reduced survival both in the entire cohort (2y OS 56% vs 96%, HR 3.24, p=0.0005) and in MRD positive patients (2y OS 34% vs 100%, HR 3.78, p=0.003) but there was no significant effect of either conditioning regimen or donor source on outcome.

Registered at ISRCTN (http://www.isrctn.com/ISRCTN55675535).

Introduction

Optimal therapy for patients with cytogenetically normal acute myeloid leukaemia (AML) remains controversial, particularly regarding the use of allogeneic stem cell transplantation (alloSCT)¹⁻³. Many recent studies have identified the presence of minimal residual disease detected by polymerase chain reaction (PCR)⁴⁻¹⁰, flow cytometry (FCM)¹¹⁻¹⁶ or next-generation sequencing (NGS)¹⁷⁻¹⁹ as a powerful predictor of outcome and MRD status is increasingly used to allocate patients for transplantation²⁰⁻²³, however peri-transplant management of MRD positive patients remains highly challenging.

Multiple studies have identified the presence of minimal residual disease (MRD) assessed by FCM²⁴⁻³², abnormal gene expression^{33,34} and NGS^{35,36} immediately prior to alloSCT as a strong predictor of adverse outcome; patients who test positive using these methods have a relapse risk of up to 69%³². As relapse after alloSCT carries a grave prognosis³⁷ there is growing interest in peri-transplant interventions to reduce or eliminate MRD, which might diminish relapse risk^{31,38}. In this regard, the effect of different conditioning regimens on the outcome of patients who are MRD positive remains uncertain^{28,39,40}.

Although the great majority of studies of pre-transplant MRD in AML have utilised FCM, over half of patients with cytogenetically normal AML harbour mutations in the gene encoding nucleophosmin (*NPM1*)^{41,42}. The recommended method for MRD assessment in these patients is reverse-transcription quantitative PCR (RT-qPCR)⁴³ which affords a sensitivity of up to 1:10⁻⁷, around 1000-fold greater than that achieved by FCM or NGS⁴⁻¹⁰. Thus, the strongly adverse outcome reported in patients who are MRD positive using FCM and NGS may not be applicable to *NPM1* mutated patients with low level positivity by PCR. Despite this, only a few small studies have examined the impact of pre-transplant *NPM1* MRD status^{10,44,45}. Absence of robust outcome data for these patients is a barrier both to rational clinical decision making and to planning interventional studies in this setting.

In this study, we report the outcomes of a large cohort of patients with *NPM1* mutated AML treated on the NCRI AML17 protocol who had pre-transplant molecular MRD assessment.

Methods

Patients. Between 2009-2014 the NCRI AML17 study (ISRCTN 55675535) enrolled 3215 patients with non-M3 AML aged 16-77 eligible for intensive chemotherapy. The treatment protocol has been described previously⁴⁶. Central screening for *NPM1* mutations was positive in 861/2949 (29%) and 530 of these provided serial samples for MRD monitoring. Paired blood (PB) and bone marrow aspirates (BM) were requested on regeneration after each cycle of chemotherapy and then every three months. Post-remission treatment was determined according to the validated NCRI risk score, with poor-risk patients recommended for allogeneic stem-cell transplantation (alloSCT) during first complete remission (CR1). For patients receiving a transplant, additional samples were requested prior to alloSCT, at D+30 and D+100 and then at three-monthly intervals for at least two years. For this study, pre-SCT results were included if the sample was taken within 60 days before transplant and the patient had not received any further therapy between sampling and the start of conditioning. Results were issued to treating clinicians from June 2012 only and after this time patients could be treated for confirmed re-emergent or persistent molecular positivity.

<u>Amplification of NPM1 mutated transcripts</u>. Samples were analysed by RT-qPCR as previously described⁴. Briefly, RNA was isolated using Trizol reagent (Life Technologies, Carlsbad, CA) and reverse transcribed using ThermoScript (Life Technologies). Primer and probe sets described by Gorello et al⁷ were used to amplify *NPM1* type A, B and D mutant transcripts and patient specific primers were designed to detect rare mutations. Samples were run in triplicate using an ABI 7900 thermocycler (Life Technologies) with parallel amplification of a control gene (*ABL*). Samples with *ABL* cycle threshold of \geq 30 were excluded. Criteria proposed by the Europe Against Cancer programme⁴⁷ were used to define MRD positivity (i.e. amplification in at least two of three replicates with cycle-threshold values of 40 or less using a threshold setting of 0.1). Molecular relapse was diagnosed if there were two consecutive positive samples showing increasing transcript levels in a patient who had previously tested MRD negative in a technically adequate sample, consistent with ELN guidelines⁴³.

<u>Analysis of FLT3 ITD status and allelic ratio</u>. PCR amplification of exons 14 and 15 of *FLT3* was performed using fluorescently labelled primers and analysed using capillary electrophoresis as previously described⁴⁸. The allelic ratio was determined by comparing the areas under the curves from the mutated and wild-type products.

<u>Statistical Analyses</u>. Kaplan-Meier estimates were used to calculate survival percentages. Time to event analysis was performed using the log rank test. Thresholds were selected by identifying cut-offs providing maximum additional discrimination. We used Cox regression with forward selection to identify independent prognostic factors. Categorical variables were analysed using Fisher's exact test. All reported P values are two-sided.

Results

In total 107/ 530 patients received alloSCT: 56 (52%) in CR1, 30 (28%) after molecular relapse (MR) and 21 (20%) in second remission after haematological relapse (CR2) (figure 1). Clinical and molecular details are shown in table 1. Median follow-up was 4.9 years from transplant (range 1.0 - 8.4y). Forty-two (39%) patients died, the cause of death was disease relapse in 21 patients, was not attributed to relapse in 19 and could not be determined in 2 patients. Overall survival 5 years from the date of transplant (5y-OS) was 65% for patients transplanted in CR1 and 54% for those transplanted after a molecular or haematological relapse (p=0.3).

Evaluable pre-SCT PB and BM samples taken in the 60 days preceding SCT were available for 103 and 78 patients, both were available for 74 patients. In total, 58 (54%) patients were MRD negative prior to SCT; 48 patients received additional chemotherapy prior to SCT for molecular (n=27) or haematological relapse (n=21) and 27/48 (56%) achieved MRD negativity (figure 1).

Survival according to pre-transplant molecular MRD status

Overall survival 2 years from allograft was 83% for MRD negative patients versus 45% for patients with any detectable MRD by RT-qPCR in the pre-transplant samples; median OS (mOS) was not reached (NR) and 10.5 months respectively (hazard ratio, HR, 3.60 95% confidence interval, CI, 1.92-6.77, p<0.0001, figure 2a). For patients with negative pre-SCT PB samples (n=73) 2y-OS was 81%, compared with 30% for patients with any PB positivity (n=30) (HR 8.30, CI 3.77-18.20, p<0.0001, fig 2b); mOS was NR and 7.4 months. Patients with a negative pre-SCT BM (n=37) had a 5y-OS of 84% compared with 49% if the BM was MRD positive (n=41); mOS was NR and 13.1 months (HR 3.17, CI 1.54-6.54, p=0.002, figure 2c).

A threshold of 200 mutant *NPM1* transcripts / 10^5 ABL copies in the pre-SCT PB sample provided maximum additional discrimination and split patients into three groups with 2y-OS of 81% (negative, n=73, mOS NR), 54% (low, 0.1-200 copies, n=13, mOS NR) and 12% (high, >200 copies, n=17, mOS 6.5 months, HR by group 2.81, CI 1.96-4.02, p<0.0001, figure 2d).

In the BM, a threshold of 1000 copies provided maximum additional discrimination and defined 3 groups with 2y-OS of 84% (negative, n=37, mOS NR), 56% (low, 0.1-1000 copies, n=32, mOS NR) and 22% (high, >1000 copies, n=9, mOS 5.8 months, HR by group 2.87, CI 1.69-4.86, p<0.0001, figure 2e).

Overall (applying the higher level where there was a discrepancy between PB and BM results), 2y-OS was 83% (n=58, mOS NR) 63% (n=30, mOS NR) and 13% (n=19, mOS 6.5 months) for patients with negative, low and high levels of MRD (HR by group 2.83, CI 1.92-4.19, p<0.0001, figure 2f).

Impact of FLT3 status on post-transplant outcome

We next stratified patients according *FLT3* ITD status. Thirty-four patients were positive for *FLT3*-ITD at diagnosis and 73 were negative; 2y-OS was 62% and 67% respectively (HR 1.14, CI 0.59-2.19, p=0.7). *FLT3* ITD status was not associated with outcome in patients who were MRD negative before transplant (2y-OS ITD negative 77%, n=40, ITD positive 94%, n=18, HR 0.42, CI 0.14-1.28, p=0.13) or those who had high levels of MRD (2y-OS ITD negative 0%, n=11, ITD positive 25%, n=8, mOS 5.8 vs 6.8 months, HR 0.71 CI 0.26-1.92, p=0.5). In contrast for patients with low levels of MRD, *FLT3* status was strongly associated with outcome: 2y-OS was 77% for ITD negative (n=22, mOS NR) and 25% for ITD positive patients (n=8, mOS 7.1 months, HR 6.14 CI 1.50-25.13, p=0.01, figure 3).

Owing to small numbers, we were unable to reliably assess the effect of *FLT3* ITD allelic ratio.

Impact of first line post-induction MRD status on post-transplant outcome

Peripheral blood MRD status after the second induction cycle of first line therapy (PBPC2) has previously been shown to be highly prognostic⁴ and retained power in this cohort (2y OS 76% vs 33% for PBPC2 negative and positive patients, mOS NR vs 9.6 months, HR 4.93, Cl 2.05-11.90, p=0.0004). There was an association between PBPC2 and pre-SCT MRD negativity (p=0.002, table 1). Of those patients who were PBPC2 negative and experienced molecular or haematological relapse, 60% (21/35) achieved MRD negativity following salvage therapy and a further 14% (5/35) were MRD positive at levels below the thresholds defined above and were *FLT3* WT; 2y OS for these patients was 88%.

Multivariable model for prediction of post-transplant outcome

We performed a multivariate analysis taking into account remission status at time of transplant (CR1 vs other), age at time of transplant, *FLT3* ITD status, PBPC2 status and pre-transplant MRD level (negative, low or high). The only factors which retained independent prognostic power were age (HR per decade 1.54, CI 1.08-2.19 p=0.02) and pre-transplant MRD level (HR 3.02, CI 1.97-4.62, p<0.0001).

We developed a two-group prognostic model incorporating MRD status (negative, low or high) and *FLT3* ITD (positive or negative). Patients who had high levels of MRD were allocated to the high-risk group together with patients with low levels of MRD who had *FLT3* ITD at diagnosis. The remaining patients were allocated to the low risk group. Patients with a negative PB and absent BM sample could not be reliably allocated to a risk group and were excluded from this analysis. There was sufficient information to assign a risk group in 83 patients. In the low-risk group (n=56) 2y-OS was 82% compared to 17% in the high-risk group (n=27, mOS NR vs 6.5 months, HR 13.2, CI 5.80-30.2, p<0.0001, figure 4).

When risk group (low or high) was introduced as a candidate variable into the multivariable model described above, the only factors to retain prognostic significance were age at time of transplant (HR per decade 1.60, CI 1.08-2.37, p=0.02) and risk group (HR 9.5, CI 4.24-21.42, p<0.0001).

Effect of transplant-related factors on outcome according to MRD status

Donor source was a matched sibling in 43 patients, a volunteer unrelated donor (VUD) in 63 and umbilical cord blood in 1. Although a trend for greater overall survival in patients whose donor was a sibling compared to a VUD was noted, this was not statistically significant (2y-OS 72% vs 62%, HR 1.81, CI 0.97-3.35, p=0.06, figure 5a).

Conditioning regimens were considered myeloablative (MAC) in 30 patients (28%, BuCy 4, CyTBI 20, FB4C 6) and reduced-intensity (RIC) in 77 (72%, FluMel 48, FluBu 11, FLAMSA-Bu 8, FluTBI 6, FluCy 2, FluCyTBI 2). Patients who received MAC were significantly younger (mean 43 vs 56 years p<0.0001). There was no difference in overall survival according to conditioning regimen type (2y OS MAC 71%, RIC 63%, HR 1.18, CI 0.61-2.29, p=0.6, figure 5b).

Alemtuzumab was given to 70 (65%) and anti-thymocyte globulin (ATG) to 12 (11%) patients for T-depletion; 2y-OS was 56% for these patients with no difference by T-depletion agent, compared to 96% in patients who did not receive T-depletion (n=25, HR 3.24, Cl 1.69-6.42, p=0.0005, figure 5c). Patients who received T-depletion were older (mean 54 vs 47y, p=0.0028) and were more likely to have been transplanted using a VUD (67% vs 33% for non-T-depleted, p=0.004) and with RIC (80% vs 44% for non-T depleted, p=0.0008). Cumulative incidence of relapse at 5 years was 24% in patients who underwent T-depletion compared with 4% in those who did not (p=0.0149). Cumulative incidence of non-relapse mortality at 5 years was 23% in patients who underwent T-depletion compared with 4% in patients who did not (p=0.0148).

Considering patients who were MRD positive prior to allograft, there was a trend for lower OS in patients who had received a VUD transplant (2y-OS 38% vs 55% for SIB, HR 1.94, CI 0.92-4.08, p=0.08, figure 5d). There was no association between OS and type of conditioning (2y OS 50% for MAC vs 43% for RIC, HR 1.22, CI 0.54-2.76, p=0.6, figure 5e). Specifically, MRD positive patients treated with the sequential FLAMSA protocol had no difference in overall survival. Patients who were MRD positive and who received T-depletion showed inferior overall survival than those who did not (2y-OS 34% vs 100%, mOS 7.8m vs NR, HR 3.78, CI 1.57-19.2, p=0.003, figure 5f).

Discussion

Patients with *NPM1* mutated AML who test MRD negative by RT-qPCR prior to transplant have an excellent chance of long-term survival regardless of other risk factors including *FLT3* status and independent of the intensity of the transplant conditioning regimen.

As expected, *NPM1* MRD positivity had an overall adverse effect on transplant outcome, but in contrast to patients who are MRD positive by FCM or NGS, patients who test positive for *NPM1* mutant transcripts prior to alloSCT do not have a universally poor outcome, indeed many become long-term survivors. Factors associated with adverse outcome are high levels of MRD (above 200 copies / 10^5 *ABL* in the PB or 1000 copies in the BM) and the presence of a *FLT3* ITD mutation at diagnosis. Patients who are MRD positive before transplant and have one or both of these features have a poor prognosis due to a high risk of disease relapse. In this study 27/48 (56%) of patients with a haematological or confirmed molecular relapse achieved MRD negativity with salvage chemotherapy and a further 8/48 (17%) became low risk as defined in our risk score. These 35 patients had an excellent outcome with an overall survival of 80% at 2 years. Additionally, 74% of patients who tested negative for MRD in the PB after second induction (PBPC2) and who subsequently relapsed achieved MRD negativity or low-risk status after salvage and had a 2y OS of 88%. This supports the approach adopted in the current NCRI AML19 protocol where such patients are not recommended for transplantation in CR1 and are offered sequential MRD monitoring to allow early detection and treatment of relapse.

Selection of transplant protocol remains controversial, particularly for patients who are MRD positive, and a key question is whether augmented conditioning can eliminate MRD and thereby improve outcome. Studies to date have provided conflicting results and have not examined the effect of transplant related factors specifically in *NPM1* mutated patients^{28,39,40,49}. Surprisingly, we observed no effect on survival according to conditioning type, either overall or in patients who were MRD positive. In contrast, we observed a strong association between use of T-depletion and adverse outcome. Relatively few patients who were MRD positive received T-replete transplants (n=8) and this retrospective non-randomised analysis clearly has significant limitations, however these results highlight T-depletion as a potentially critical factor which has not been consistently reported in other studies to date.

These findings require independent validation, however patients at highest risk of relapse identified here may benefit from an alternative approach prior to transplant such as the use of *FLT3* inhibition to reduce the level of MRD below the thresholds identified. Alternatively, augmentation of the graft-versus-leukaemia effect (e.g. through avoidance or minimisation of T-depletion, early withdrawal of immunosuppression and / or donor lymphocyte infusion) may be considered. Randomised studies to investigate these approaches are urgently required.

Acknowledgements

This study was funded by a programme grant from the UK National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) and a Clinical Trial Award from Cancer Research UK. In addition, RD is supported by Bloodwise and JJ is supported by Children With Cancer. We gratefully acknowledge assistance from the Cardiff University Centre for Trials Research (Ian Thomas, Sophie Betteridge, Laura Upton, Leona Batten, Melanie Varley) and sincerely thank all clinicians and patients for their participation in NCRI AML17.

Authorship contributions

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Disclosure of conflicts of interest

The authors have no relevant conflicts of interest to declare.

Appendix

We gratefully acknowledge the support of all haematologists, nurses and laboratory scientists who contributed to the molecular monitoring arm of the National Cancer Research Institute AML17 trial.

Aalborg Hospital: Maria Kallenbach, Anne-Merete Kirkeby Olsen; Aarhus University Hospital: Ingrid Elizabeth Gejel, Peter Hokland, Jan Maxwell Nørgaard, Hans Beier Ommen, Charlotte Nyvold; Aberdeen Royal Infirmary: Dominic Culligan, Hazel Forbes, Benedict Milner; Arrowe Park Hospital: Ranjit Dasgupta, Barbara Hammer; Ayr Hospital / Crosshouse: Phil Cannon, Paul Eynaud, Julie Gillies, Peter Maclean; Barnet General Hospital: Anita Amadi, Virginia Jennings, Andres Virchis; Barts and the London NHS Trust: Jamie Cavenagh, John Gribben, Simon Hallam, Sameena Igbal, Sarah Knight, Heather Oakervee, Tobi Sogbanmu, Matthew Smith; Basingstoke and North Hampshire Foundation NHS Trust: Alison Milne, Ashok Roy, Nigel Sargant, Sylwia Simpson; Beatson West of Scotland Cancer Centre: Annie Latif, Andrew Clark, Mhairi Copland, Donna Kelly, Mike Leach, Anne Parker, Mark Drummond, Pam McKay, Richard Soutar; Belfast City Hospital: Claire Arnold, Mark Catherwood, Robert Cuthbert, Caroline Kerr, Damian Finnegan, Lorraine McKenna, Mary Frances McMullin, Ken Mills, Victoria Pechey; Birmingham Heartlands Hospital: Donald Milligan, Manos Nikolousis, Neil Smith, Sundip Sohanpal; Blackpool Victoria Hospital NHS Foundation Trust: Paul Cahalin, Joyce Jones, Seye Kolade; Borders General Hospital: Ashok Okhandiar, Melanie Tolson, John Tucker; Bradford Royal Infirmary: Sam Ackroyd, Victoria Drew, Vickie Hawkins, Anita Hill, Lisa Newton, Adrian Williams; Bristol Haematology and Oncology Centre: Roger Evely, Lucy Henderson, Jonathan Heywood, David Marks, Priyanka Mehta, Rachel Protheroe, Graham Standen; Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust: Anthony Bench, Jenny Craig, Charles Crawley, George Follows, Linda Gidman, Brian Huntly, Pramila Krishnamurthy, Kuldip Singh, George Vassilou; Chesterfield Royal Hospital: Rod Collin, Sian Edwards, Lynne Hardy, Lesley Stevenson, Mark Wodzinski; Children's Hospital for

Wales: Philip Connor, Meriel Jenney, Indu Thakur; Christchurch Hospital: Geraldine Duncan, Peter Ganly, Vickie Hanrahan, Joanne Sanders, Ruth Spearing; Christie Hospital **NHS Trust**: Safia Barber, Michelle Davies, Mike Dennis, Steven Heald, Samar Kulkarni, Simeon Mitton, Tim Somervaille, Jo Tomlins; Countess of Chester Hospital: Edwin Lee, Arvind Pillai, Janet Spriggs, Lesley Stevens, Salaheddin Tueger; Darent Valley Hospital: Anil Kamat, Lesley Knott, Tarig Shafi, Jaquie Smith-Hedges; Derby Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust: Juanah Addada, Julie Dockree, Joanna Grenyer, Christopher Millar; Derriford Hospital: Joanna Farrugia, Hannah Hunter, Patrick Medd, Tim Nokes, Wayne Thomas; Doncaster Royal Infirmary: Robert Cutting, Joe Joseph, Stuti Kaul, Youssef Sorour; Dorset County Hospital NHS Foundation Trust: Sally Love, Akeel Moosa, Amy Publicover; East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust: Lavinia Davey, Marie Evans, Jindriska Lindsay, Chris Pocock, Vijay Ratnayake, Kamiran Saied; East Sussex Hospitals NHS Trust: Judy Beard, Kay Jones-Skipper, Satyajit Sahu; Epsom and St Helier University NHS Trust: Nikki Evans, Jane Mercieca; Falkirk and District Royal Infirmary: Christopher Brammer, Marie Hughes; Glan Clwyd Hospital: Margaret Goodrick, Earnest Heartin, Christine Hoyle, Fiona Redmond; Gloucestershire Royal Hospital: Eve Blundell, Chris Ford, Rebecca Frewin, Richard Lush, Adam Rye; Great Western Hospital: Norbert Blesing, Nicola Cowling, Jan Dodge, Atherton Gray, Sarah Green, Chanelle Meyer, Alex Sternberg; Guy's and St Thomas' Foundation Trust: Beverley Hunt, Jennie Lok, Donal McLornan, Kavita Raj; Hairmyres Hospital: lain Singer; Hammersmith Hospital: Mary Rose Nazaret, Jiri Pavlu; Heatherwood and Wexham Park NHS Foundation Trust: Nicky Barnes, Nicola Bienz, Peter Mackie, Simon Moule, Mark Offer, Nicola Philpott; Hereford **County Hospital:** Lisa Robinson; **Herlev Hospital:** Morten Krogh Jensen, Ulrik Overgaard; Hillingdon Hospital: Richard Kaczmarski, Gail Poonawala; Hull Royal Infirmary: Sahra Ali, Andrew Fletcher, Simone Greene, Judith Hogg; Ipswich Hospital NHS Trust: Debo Ademokun, Isobel Chalmers, Andrew Hodson, Mary Selvaraj; James Cook University **Hospital**: Raymond Dang, Jamie Maddox, Pam McLinn, Dianne Plews, Angela Wood; James Paget University Hospital: Rachel Conway, Cesar Gomez, Manzoor Mangi, Shalal Sadullah; John Radcliffe Hospital: Angela Hamblin, Shirley Henderson, Anna Schuh, Adele Timbs, Paresh Vyas, Lynn Quek; Kettering General Hospital: Isaac Wilson-Morkeh, Mark Kwan, Matthew Lyttelton, Margaret Turns, Joanne Walsh; Leicester Royal Infirmary: Ann Hunter, Murray Martin; Lincoln County Hospital: Caroline Harvey, Rhiannan Pegg, Kandeepan Saravanamuttu; Maidstone Hospital: Evangelia Dimitriadou, Richard Gale, Donald Gillett, Saad Rassam; Manchester Royal Infirmary: Pippa Bulger, Vicki Conroy, Fiona Dignan, Patricia Sparham, Eleni Tholouli; Medway Maritime Hospital: Maadh Aldouri, Vivienne Andrews, Kay Jones, Nicola Southwell; Milton Keynes Hospital NHS Foundation Trust: Moez Dungarwalla, Subir Mitra, Denise White; Monklands Hospital:

Linda Callachan, Janet Duncan, Lisa Ferguson, Lindsay Mitchell, John Murphy, Pamela Paterson, Alaeddin Raafat, Charlotte Thomas; New Cross Hospital: Supratik Basu, Claire Beardsmore, Sunil Hada, Alan MacWhannell, Julie Walsh; Ninewells Hospital and Medical Centre: Keith Gelly, Duncan Gowans, Ann Hyslop, Norene Keenan, David Meiklejohn, Sudhir Tauro; Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust: Matthew Lawes; North Middlesex University Hospital: Neil Rabin; Northampton General Hospital: Angela Bowen, Andrea Jones, Suchitra Krishnamurthy, Jan Miles, Jane Parker; Northwick Park Hospital: Robert Ayto, Louise Enfield, Shelley Harvey, Nicki Panoskaltsis; **Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust:** Kate Forman, Simone Stokley, Jenny Byrne, Ian Carter, Emma Das-Gupta, Julie Kenny, Laurence Pearce, Nigel Russell, Melissa Shaw; Odense University Hospital: Lone Friis, Claus Marcher, Birgitte Wolf Lundholm; **Peterborough District Hospital**: Susan George, Catherine Hoggarth, Sateesh Nagumantry, Kanchan Rege, Hannah Sims, Muthuswamy Sivakumaran; Pinderfields General Hospital: Mary Chapple, Victoria Hawkins, Paul Moreton, Charlotte Mountain, Louise Parker, Kavita Patil, David Wright; **Poole General Hospital**: Anita Immanuel, Fergus Jack, Monika Kozlowska, Rebecca Maddams, Kate Mutendera; Queen Alexandra Hospital: Robert Corser, Tanya Cranfield, Helen Dignum, Mary Ganczakowski, Christopher Jones, Shanqin Liu, Yvonne Silber; Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham: Charles Craddock, Sally Jeffries, Jim Murray, Sandeep Nagra, Manoj Raghavan; Queen Elizabeth Hospital Woolwich: Betty Cheung, Suzanne Chukundah, Bridget Kabagambe, Nic Ketley, Ana Duran, Theodorah Nago; Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Kings Lynn: Jane Keidan, Annette Miles; Queens Hospital: Pamela Benson, Claire Hemmaway; Raigmore Hospital **NHS Highland**: Seonaid Arnott, Peter Forsyth, Chris Lush, Georgina Simpson; Rigshospitalet: Mette Klarskov Andersen, Morten Tolstrup Andersen, Ole Wei Bjerrum, Rikke Duus, Kirsten Grønbæk, Peter Kampmann, Lars Kjeldsen, Ove Juul Nielsen, Carsten Niemann; Royal Berkshire Hospital: Juliette Dye, Anna Gillham, Henri Grech, Asif Khan, Stuart Mucklow, Rebecca Sampson; Royal Bournemouth Hospital: Joseph Chacko, Rachel Hall, Helen McCarthy, Nicola Naraine; Royal Cornwall Hospital: Desmond Creagh Richard Noble, Bryson Pottinger; Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital: Emily Collyer, Malcolm Hamilton, Lydia Hill, Paul Kerr, Jackie Ruell, Mary Tamplin, Anthony Todd; Royal Free Hospital: Panos Kottaridis; Royal Hallamshire Hospital: Harpreet Kaur, John Snowden, Gill Wilson; Royal Manchester Children's Hospital: Denise Bonney; Royal Oldham Hospital: Allameddine Allameddine, David Osborne; Royal Surrey County Hospital: Johannes De Vos, Elisabeth Grey-Davies, Louise Hendry; Royal United Hospital: Christine Cox, Josephine Crowe, Christopher Knechtli; Russells Hall Hospital: Savio Fernandes, Steve Jenkins, Jeff Neilson, Angela Watts, Claire Watts; Salford Royal Hospital: John Houghton, Simon Jowitt, Anne-Marie Lydon, Sonya Ravenscroft, Rowena

Thomas-Dewing, Sonya Zaman; Salisbury Hospital NHS Foundation: Nick Cross, Jonathan Cullis, Tamara Everington, Effie Grand, Claire Smith; Sandwell Hospital Trust: Richard Murrin, Igor Novitzky-Basso, Lisa Smith, Faroog Wandoo; Singleton Hospital: Helen Cheley, Saad Ismail, Unmesh Mohite, Kez Richards; South Devon Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust: Patrick Roberts, Nichola Rymes, Steve Smith, Deborah Turner; Southampton University Hospital NHS Trust: Mary Morgan, Kate Hill, Matthew Jenner, Kim Orchard, Deborah Richardson; Southern General Hospital:, Alistair Hart, Anne Morrison, Ian Macdonald, Emma Moody, Claudia Turley; St Helens and Knowsley NHS Trust: Toby Nicholson; St James University Hospital: Karen Benn, David Bowen, Gordon Cook, Paul Evans, Maria Gilleece, Richard Kelly, Suzanne Liebersbach, Mike Short, Fatima Umama; St Richards Hospital: Phillip Bevan, Sarah Janes; Stafford Hospital: Michelle Forrester-Amoako, Carol Harvey, Kamaraj Karunanithi, Neil Phillips, Paul Revell, Andrew Stewart; Taunton and Somerset Foundation Trust: Sarah Allford, Simon Bolam, Angela Locke; The Newcastle upon Tyne NHS Foundation Trust: Matt Collin, Catherine Cox, Graham Jackson, Gail Jones, Anne Lennard, Smeera Nair; University College London Hospitals: Kirit Ardeshna, Ben Carpenter, Sharon Edleston, Victoria Grandage, Rachael Hough, Asim Khwaja, Wong Wai Keong, Nishal Patel, Andres Virchis, Jamie Wilson, Kwee Yong; University Hospital Aintree: Barbara Hammer, Walid Sadik, Vikram Singh, Jeffery Smith, Barrie Woodcock, Lynny Yung; University Hospital Coventry and Warwickshire **NHS Trust**: Yvonne Beadle, Anton Borg, Beth Harrison, Nicholas Jackson, Peter Rose, Syed Bokhari; University Hospital Lewisham: Katrina Armour, Abel Jalloh, Tullie Jeghen, Naheed Mir; University Hospital of North Staffordshire NHS Trust: Andrew Stewart, Deepak Chandra, Kamaraj Karunanithi, Srinivas Pillai; University Hospital of North Tees and Hartlepool: Philip Mounter, Simon Sinclair; University Hospital of Wales: Caroline Alvares, Steve Austin, Joanne Gill, Wendy Ingram, Jonathan Kell, Steve Knapper, Sian Meyrick, Katja Williams; University of Liverpool and Royal Liverpool University Hospital: Richard Clark, Elizabeth Dale, Rak Salim, Usira Vithanarachchi, Sarah Watmough; Victoria Hospital NHS Fife: Kerri Davidson, Maureen Devaney, Stephen Rogers, Peter Williamson; Wishaw General Hospital: Annielle Hung, Gila Helenglass; Worcestershire Royal Hospital: Fiona Clark, Elizabeth Maughan, Juliet Mills, Gaynor Pemberton, Nicholas Pemberton, Salim Shafeek; Worthing Hospital: Aisling O'Driscoll, Santosh Narat, Sarah Thompson; York Hospital: Lee Bond, Laura Munro, Nora Youngs; Ysbyty Gwynedd: Kathryn Chester, James Seale, Alice Thomas.

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Table Legends

Table 1.

Clinical, molecular and transplant-related variables in each MRD-defined group. Spearman correlation *p* value is provided for the age comparison and Mantel-Haenszel *p* value is provided for all other variables. CR1 first complete remission. PB peripheral blood

Table 1

Pre-transplant MRD status	High n=19	Low n=30	Negative n=58	р
Median age, years Range	53 40-69	53 17-65	54 24-66	1.0
FLT3 ITD positive	8 (42%)	8 (27%)	18 (31%)	0.5
FLT3 ITD allelic ratio >0.5	4 (21%)	3 (10%)	7 (12%)	0.4
PB Post #2 MRD positive	6/17 (35%)	11/26 (42%)	4/53 (8%)	0.002
Transplanted in CR1	5 (26%)	20 (67%)	31 (53%)	0.16
Myeloablative conditioning	8 (42%)	6 (20%)	17 (29%)	0.5
Sibling donor	6 (32%)	14 (47%)	23 (40%)	0.7
T cell depletion	16 (84%)	25 (83%)	41 (71%)	0.15

Figure Legends

Figure 1.

CONSORT diagram showing the number of patients in each part of the trial, therapy given prior to transplant and outcomes in each group. CT chemotherapy, MRD minimal residual disease, NRM non-relapse mortality, REL relapse, UNK unknown cause of death.

Figure 2.

Overall survival from date of transplant according to pre-transplant molecular MRD status.

Panels A-C show the difference in survival between patients with positive and negative MRD (A) overall (B) in the peripheral blood, (C) in the bone marrow. Panels D-F show the difference in survival between patients with negative, low and high levels of MRD (D) in the peripheral blood using a cut-off at 200 copies per $10^5 ABL$ (E) in the bone marrow with level of >1000 copies and (E) with either, defining "high level" MRD. Percentages indicate estimated 2 year OS.

Figure 3.

Effect of *FLT3* ITD on outcome according to pre-transplant MRD status. (A) Hazard ratio and 95% confidence intervals for *FLT3* ITD mutation in each group. (B-D) Overall survival from transplant for patients with high (B), low (C) and negative (D) pre-transplant MRD. Percentages indicate estimated 2 year overall survival.

Figure 4.

Overall survival from transplant according to the risk group. The risk group was derived from *FLT3* ITD status and pre-transplant MRD level. Patients with high levels of MRD, and those with low levels who had the *FLT3* ITD mutation were allocated to the high-risk group. All other patients were allocated to the low-risk group. Percentages indicate estimated 2 year overall survival.

Figure 5.

Effect of transplant-related factors on overall survival. Panels A-C show the effect of transplant related variables in the entire cohort, panels D-F show their effect in patients who were MRD-positive prior to transplantation. (A,D) Effect of donor source. (B,E) Effect of conditioning type. (C,F) Effect of T-cell depletion. SIB sibling donor, VUD volunteer unrelated donor, MAC myeloablative conditioning, RIC reduced intensity conditioning.































