

Recurrent SARS-CoV-2 mutations in immunodeficient patients

S. A. J. Wilkinson,¹ Alex Richter,² Anna Casey,¹ Husam Osman,³ Jeremy D Mirza,¹ Joanne Stockton,¹ Josh Quick,¹ Liz Ratcliffe,³ Natalie Sparks,¹ Nicola Cumley,¹ Radoslaw Poplawski,¹ Samuel N. Nicholls,¹ Beatrix Kele,⁴ Kathryn Harris,⁴ The COVID-19 Genomics UK (COG-UK) consortium,⁵ Thomas P Peacock,^{5,*} and Nicholas J Loman^{1,*}

¹Institute of Microbiology and Infection, School of Biosciences, University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK, ²Institute of Immunology and Immunotherapy (III), College of Medical and Dental Sciences, University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK, ³Queen Elizabeth Hospital, University Hospitals Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TH, UK, ⁴Virology Department, Royal London Hospital, Barts Health NHS Trust, London, EC1A 7BE, UK and ⁵Department of Infectious Disease, Imperial College London, London, Westminster W2 1PG, UK

*Corresponding authors: E-mail: thomas.peacock09@imperial.ac.uk; n.j.loman@bham.ac.uk

Abstract

Long-term severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) infections in immunodeficient patients are an important source of variation for the virus but are understudied. Many case studies have been published which describe one or a small number of long-term infected individuals but no study has combined these sequences into a cohesive dataset. This work aims to rectify this and study the genomics of this patient group through a combination of literature searches as well as identifying new case series directly from the COVID-19 Genomics UK (COG-UK) dataset. The spike gene receptor-binding domain and N-terminal domain (NTD) were identified as mutation hotspots. Numerous mutations associated with variants of concern were observed to emerge recurrently. Additionally a mutation in the envelope gene, T30I was determined to be the second most frequent recurrently occurring mutation arising in persistent infections. A high proportion of recurrent mutations in immunodeficient individuals are associated with ACE2 affinity, immune escape, or viral packaging optimisation. There is an apparent selective pressure for mutations that aid cell–cell transmission within the host or persistence which are often different from mutations that aid *inter*-host transmission, although the fact that multiple recurrent *de novo* mutations are considered defining for variants of concern strongly indicates that this potential source of novel variants should not be discounted.

Key words: SARS-CoV-2; genomics; variant emergence; persistent infection; immunodeficiency; convergent evolution.

Introduction

Long-term SARS-CoV-2 infections in immunodeficient patients are important, but understudied (Moran et al. 2021). Evolution of viruses during long-term infection is an important source of novel variation and is thought to be a key influence on the evolutionary dynamics of SARS-CoV-2 generally, and the emergence of new variants specifically. Notably Alpha and Omicron, which were responsible for recent epidemic waves globally, are hypothesised by some to have arisen during long-term infections (Rambaut et al. 2020; Msomi et al. 2021). The Alpha variant (B.1.1.7) emerged abruptly with a constellation of novel mutations and a long branch length from its nearest common ancestor in the B.1.1 clade, during a time of extremely high surveillance in the UK (Rambaut et al. 2020). A likely explanation is that the Alpha variant evolved within a single long-term host over a long period before emergence back into the general population. Evolution during long-term infection has been associated with the rapid accumulation of many mutations within a short period (Avanzato et al. 2020; Choi et al. 2020; Baang et al. 2021; Jensen et al. 2021; Karim et al. 2021; Peacock

et al. 2021; Riddell et al. 2022). The Beta (B.1.351), Gamma (P.1), and Omicron (B.1.1.529) variants all emerged in similar circumstances to alpha, potentially suggesting that they also emerged from long-term infections.

To better understand evolutionary pressures associated with viral evolution during long-term infections, a dataset composed of 168 SARS-CoV-2 genomes was compiled to examine the frequency of recurrent mutations. These genomes were associated with twenty-eight patients with a range of conditions that result in immunodeficiency significant enough to prevent rapid viral clearance. This builds upon previous work performing a similar analysis using case studies that included a total of ten patients (Peacock et al. 2021). This analysis expands on that work by utilising a significantly larger dataset which increases the power, also many of the cases included are the alpha variant which have not been discussed in the context of long-term SARS-CoV-2 cases previously and potentially gives insight into future variant emergence, and lastly all genome series were analysed using a single analysis pipeline.

Methods

Dataset assembly

Patient-associated genome series were selected for inclusion via a literature search for case studies using the following search terms and filters: After 2019, 'SARS-CoV-2', 'nCoV-2019', 'Immunodeficient', 'Immunocompromised', 'long-term', all searches took place between the dates 1 August 2021 and 30 November 2021. Other genome series were extracted from the COG-UK dataset, a UK-wide genomic surveillance repository (COVID-19 Genomics UK (COG-UK) 2020; Nicholls et al. 2021).

Genome series were only included if they met the following criteria: at least two genomes available on either public databases or via a request, evidence of long-term viral infection for a period no less than 28 days (some genome series covered a shorter period but the clinical information met this criterion), clinical information available was sufficient to indicate the nature of the patient's immune deficiency. For all genome series included in the dataset, a Civet report (O'Toole et al. 2021a) was generated using Civet v3.0. These reports confirm that all genomes were the result of long-term infections rather than a superinfection or independent infection events by virtue of individual genomes sharing a recent common ancestor with a step-wise accumulation of mutations over time. A single genome from patient 11 was excluded due to a probable superinfection as described by (Tarhini et al. 2021). Figures were generated for each phylogeny generated with civet using ggtree (Yu et al. 2018) and are included within the supplementary material.

Genomes included in the dataset were obtained from: (Choi et al. 2020; Avanzato et al. 2020; Reuken et al. 2021; Tarhini et al. 2021; Kemp et al. 2021 Baang et al. 2021; Stanevich et al. 2021; Khatamzas et al. 2021; Borges et al. 2021; Riddell et al. 2022; Ciuffreda et al. 2021; Jensen et al. 2021; Weigang et al. 2021). A full description of the dataset is available within the supplementary material of this article. When a genome series was selected for inclusion all genomes were placed within an individual multi-fasta file with a header identifying the patient via an identifier ('pt-1', 'pt-2', etc.) and the number of days passed since the initial genome available within that genome series (the day 0 genome), in several cases this genome was collected after a lengthy period of active infection but only the time period covered by the genome series was considered in the analysis.

Mutation calling of genomes

Mutation calling was automated with an R script adapted from (Mercatelli et al. 2021) which utilises Nucleotide mummer (NUCmer) (Marçais et al. 2018) for genome alignment to an annotated SARS-CoV-2 reference sequence (Wu et al. 2020) and defines Single Nucleotide Polymorphisms (SNPs), insertions, deletions, frameshifts, and inversions relative to this reference sequence (NCBI accession NC_045512.2). One change was made to the annotations of the reference in the case of the ORF1ab polyprotein gene non-structural protein12 (NSP12) where the position was adjusted by a single nucleotide so that all mutation calls would be relative to the reading frame post the ribosomal frameshift for simplicity; zero mutations were detected in the pre-ribosomal frameshift region of NSP12, therefore, no mutations were incorrectly annotated as a result.

De novo mutation cumulative occurrence analysis pipeline

Processing of the mutation calls was performed with a Python script (https://github.com/BioWilko/recurrent-sars-cov-2-mutations/blob/main/mutation_call_analysis.py) to investigate *de novo*

mutations (DNMs). A DNM was defined as observed mutations within a genome series that were not present at day 0 of the genome series. It should be noted it is possible a subset of the mutation present at day 0 could have arisen in the chronic patients prior to the first sequence being found and would therefore not be included in this analysis. DNMs which reverted to the day 0 base were still counted as a DNM occurrence within a genome series since they did indeed occur. Further to this a recurrent mutation was defined as a DNM which was observed to occur within more than one genome series. A cumulative count of each observed DNM was performed for each day between 0 and the maximum genome series length (218 days). When a deletion was observed all deletions with a reference position within eighteen nucleotides of the reference position of the initial deletion regardless of length or position were clustered as a single region. Ambiguous nucleotides were not considered in mutation calling. The resultant dataframe was finally formatted with an R script and figures generated using ggplot2 (Wickham 2016).

Results

The SARS-CoV-2 spike gene (S) demonstrated the greatest number of recurrent mutations in the dataset (Fig. 2, Fig. 1) with ten substitutions—S:S13I, S:T95I, S:G142V, S:L452R, S:E484K, S:E484G, S:F486I, S:F490L, S:Q493K, and S:Q498R. The domain where the highest number of DNM occurrences were observed was the RBD with seven, followed by the NTD with five, and the SP with one for a total of thirteen. Clustering mutations by AA loci additionally revealed the following sites as notable: S:484, S:501, S:330, and S:440. The domain with the highest number of AA loci with DNMs was the RBD with nine, followed by the NTD with five, and the SP with one. The most frequently occurring DNM was S:E484K with eight occurrences, when all DNMs at the S:484 locus are clustered (Fig. 2); the number of occurrences is increased to twelve clearly demonstrating an enrichment of DNMs at this locus. The DNMs at the locus S:484 consist of: eight S:E484K, two S:E484G, and one each of S:E484Q, and S:E484A. AA loci clustering highlighted the loci S:330, S:440, and S:501 as recurrent for DNMs (\geq two occurrences in the period).

The only recurrent deletions observed in the dataset were located within the NTD of S-gene: S: Δ 67 region (recurrent deletion region 1/RDR1), S: Δ 138 region (RDR2), and S: Δ 243 region (RDR4) (McCarthy et al. 2021). S: Δ 138 region was the most frequent with four occurrences, followed by S: Δ 67 region and S: Δ 138 region with two occurrences, respectively. Deletions within the S: Δ 67 region consisted of one S: Δ 67 and one S: Δ 69–70, the unconventional annotation is the result of the algorithm utilised to cluster deletions, the genome series in which S: Δ 67 occurred already possessed S: Δ 69 in its day 0 genome. S-gene constitutes just over one-eighth of the overall SARS-CoV-2 genome by length; despite this, \sim 34 per cent (79/234) of the total DNM occurrences were observed within S-gene as well as 59 per cent (13/22) of the recurrent DNMs.

Non-spike, non-ORF1ab SARS-CoV-2 genes demonstrated a lower number of DNM occurrences (Fig. 3, Fig. 1). Three mutations within Matrix (M) and Envelope (E) were notable in their frequency (\geq 2 occurrences in the period): E:T30I and M:H125Y. E:T30I was the only recurrent DNM observed within E-gene and the second most frequent DNM revealed by the analysis overall at six occurrences. E:T30I occurrences were not observed to be associated with any particular source study, geographical region, or SARS-CoV-2 lineage suggesting this may be a sensitive marker

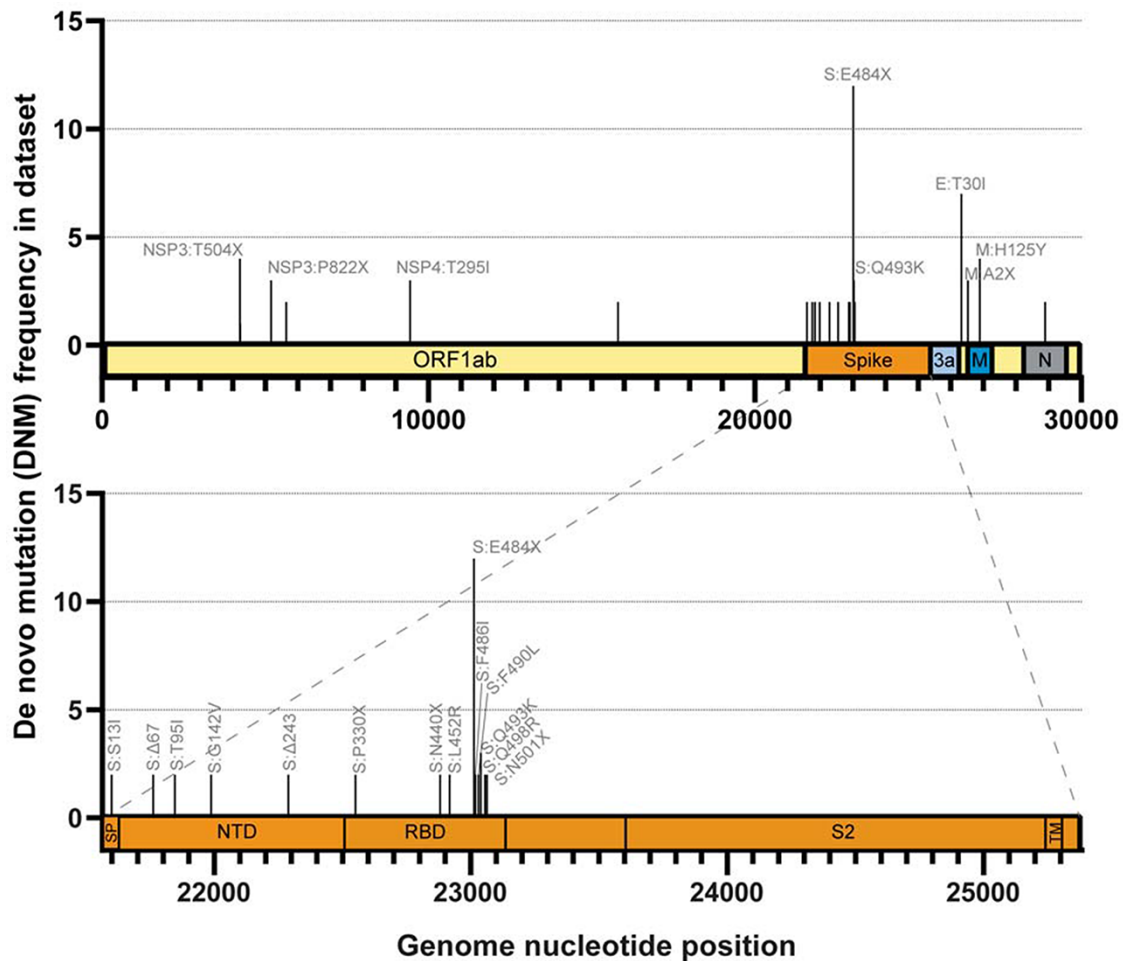


Figure 1. Distribution of *de novo* mutations included in this study across the entire SARS-CoV-2 genome. Schematic of SARS-CoV-2 genome with relevant ORFs annotated. DNMs with the highest frequency annotated by amino acid position and substitutions—X indicates multiple amino acids form DNMs at this position.

for persistent infection. Within M-gene, M:H125Y was the only recurrent DNM with four occurrences.

When DNMs observed in these genes were clustered by AA loci the findings remained almost entirely unchanged other than in the case of the locus M:2 which was raised to three DNM occurrences by day 218 rather than the two presented in (Fig. 3).

ORF1ab polyprotein genes, constituting many NSPs within SARS-CoV-2, demonstrated a larger number of recurrent mutations but still far fewer than in spike (Fig. 4). Six DNMs were notable for their occurrence frequency: NSP3:T504P, NSP3:T820I, NSP3:P822L, NSP3:K977Q, NSP4:T295I, and NSP12:V792I. ORF1ab contained 86 out of the 195 DNMs observed, but only six of the total of twenty-one of the recurrent DNMs ORF1ab constitutes more than two-thirds of the overall SARS-CoV-2 genome by length making the number of overall DNMs within the polyprotein disproportionately lower than would be expected if the distribution were random.

When DNMs observed within ORF1ab were clustered by AA loci the overall shape of the results remain broadly identical with two exceptions: NSP3:T504 and NSP3:P822 where their day 218 occurrences are raised to 3 and 4, respectively.

The relative frequencies for each recurrent mutation observed in the DNM occurrence analysis were compared to their prevalence within the COG-UK dataset (on 23 November 2021) (Table 1). As in the initial analysis S:E484K, E:T30I, and M:H125Y are

noteworthy in their frequency especially compared to their low frequency in the larger COG-UK dataset.

Each observed recurrent DNM was compared to the UKHSA VOC/VUI definition files (Table 2). S:E484K was the most frequent DNM to appear in VOC/VUI definitions with eleven appearances, then S:L452R with four, then S:T95I and S:Δ138/RDR2 region with three each, followed by NSP3:K977Q, NSP3:P822L, S:Q498R, S:Δ67/RDR1 region, and S:Δ243/RDR4 region with one each. Of the twenty-one recurrent DNMs observed in the analysis nine of them are considered defining mutations for a VOC/VUI.

Discussion

Not all mutations are discussed in detail, while a literature search has been performed for every recurrent DNM only those with sufficient literature available for discussion to be informative were included below.

S-gene—RBD recurrent mutations

The frequency of RBD DNMs observed in this analysis is a significant finding; the RBD is a relatively small region of the SARS-CoV-2 genome making up less than 2 per cent of the genome by length, but these account for 17 per cent of all DNMs observed (Fig. 1). It is clear that RBD mutations were the most strongly selected for in the immunocompromised patients included within the dataset.

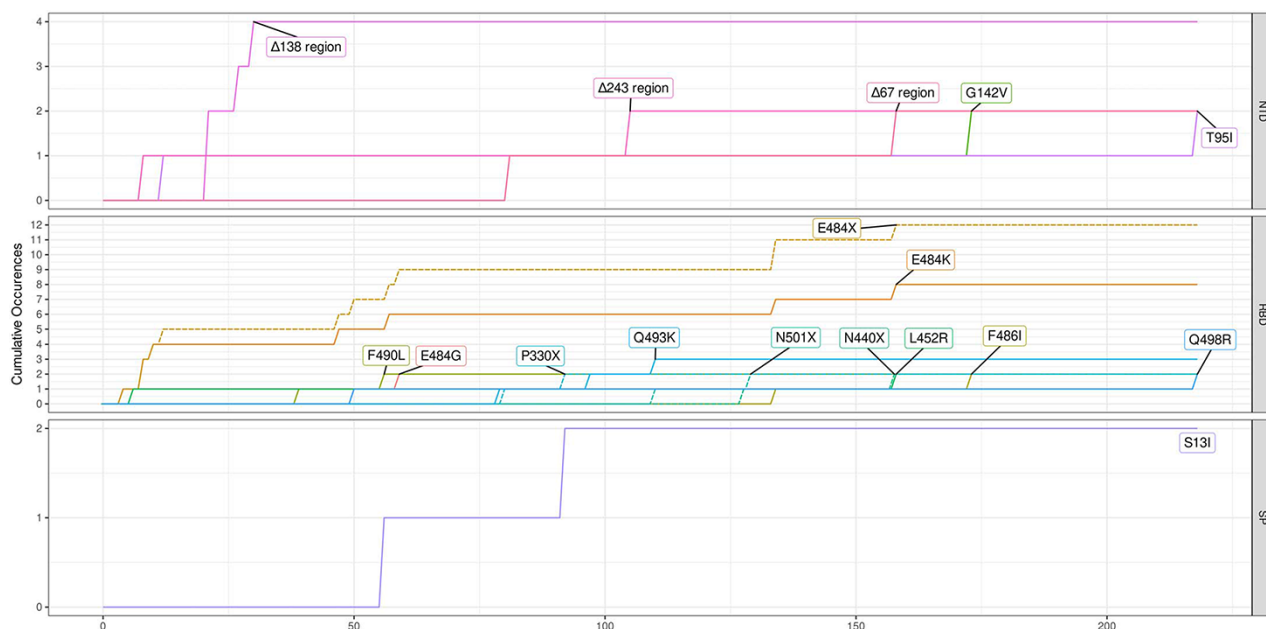


Figure 2. Cumulative occurrences of non-synonymous recurrent *de novo* mutations in S-gene divided by gene domain in 168 genomes obtained from twenty-eight patients. Substitution mutations were clustered by amino acid loci, this is notated with the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry (IUPAC) ambiguity code **X** to indicate any possible amino acid, lines for cumulative sites are dashed for easier differentiation. Only loci that were notable when clustered (significant difference with non-clustered equivalent or loci not highlighted without clustering) were included in the figure. Mutations were observed in the following domains: NTD, receptor-binding domain (RBD), and the SP (Xia 2021). Deletions (Δ) were clustered within a window of six amino acids (AA) regardless of length or position of deletion; full details of the breakdown can be found at https://github.com/BioWilko/recurrent-sars-cov-2-mutations/blob/main/dataset/mutation_calls.csv. The first genome from each patient was considered to be day 0. The sampling periods and frequencies within the dataset were highly variable, 218 days was the longest time period covered within the dataset but the majority were much shorter, the full details of the dataset are available in [Supplementary Table S1](#). All recurrent *de novo* mutations were labelled on the graph.

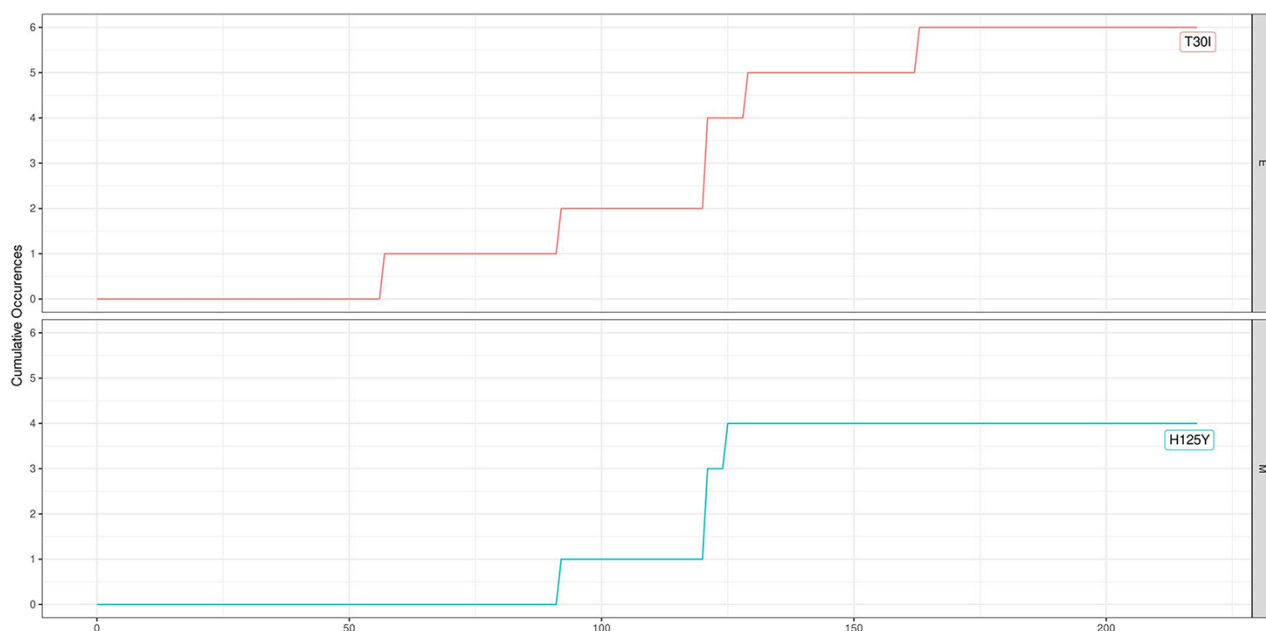


Figure 3. Cumulative occurrences of non-synonymous recurrent DNMs in genes other than S or ORF1ab subdivided by gene in 168 genomes obtained from 28 patients. Recurrent DNMs were observed in **E** (encodes envelope protein) and **M** (encodes membrane glycoprotein) genes, the full details of the gene definitions used are available from (Wu et al. 2020). The first genome from each patient was considered to be day 0. The sampling periods and frequencies within the dataset were highly variable, 218 days was the longest time period covered within the dataset but the majority were much shorter, the full details of the dataset are available in [Supplementary Table S1](#). All recurrent DNMs were labelled on-graph.

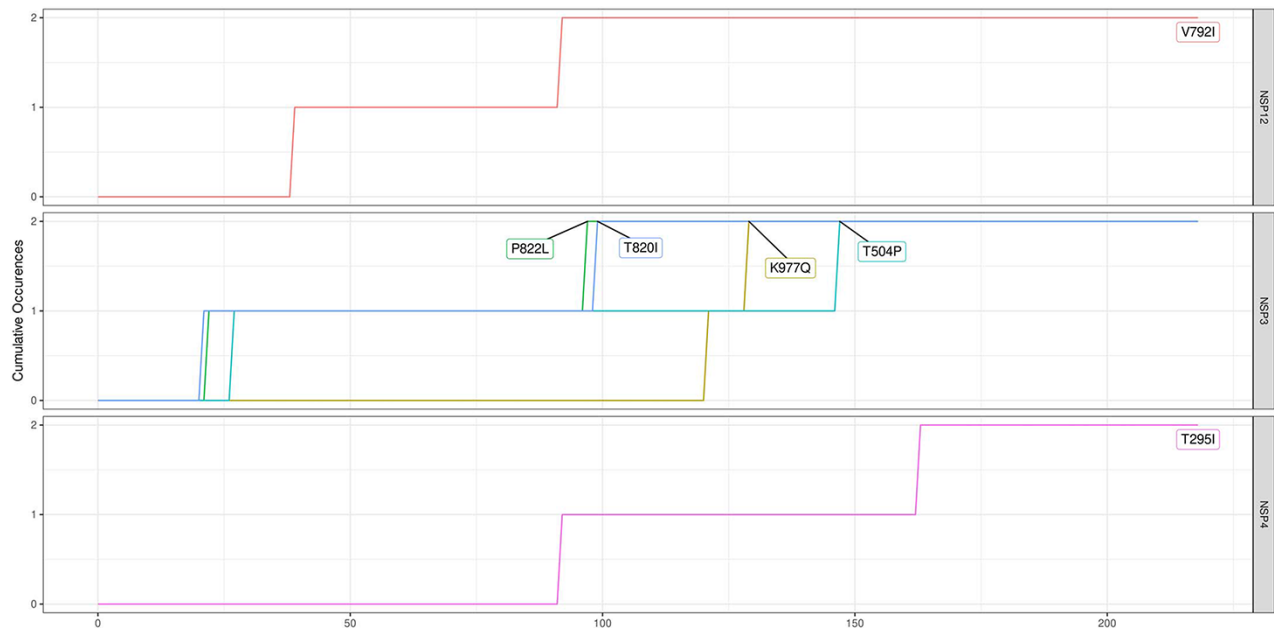


Figure 4. Cumulative occurrences of non-synonymous recurrent DNMs in ORF1ab polyprotein subdivided by gene in 168 genomes obtained from 28 patients. The first genome from each patient was considered to be day 0. The sampling periods and frequencies within the dataset was highly variable, 218 days was the longest time period covered within the dataset but the majority were much shorter, the full details of the dataset are available in [Supplementary Table S1](#). All recurrent DNMs were labelled on-graph.

Table 1. DNM occurrence frequencies for all recurrent DNMs in this analysis and the COG-UK dataset ($n = 1,576,942$). COG-UK dataset figures were generated using the dataset as it existed on 7 December 2021. Data was generated via CLIMB-Covid ([Nicholls et al. 2021](#)). The COG-UK dataset was used due to the quality of metadata available as a background dataset as well as programmatic access to variant information through existing CLIMB-COVID tools.

DNM annotation	Frequency in DNM occurrence analysis	Frequency in COG-UK dataset	Percentage of genome series in which DNM occurred	Percentage of genomes in COG-UK with DNM
S:E484K	8	3,437	28.57%	0.2180%
E:T30I	6	208	21.42%	0.0132%
M:H125Y	4	2,188	14.29%	0.1387%
S:Δ138 region	4	283,289	14.29%	17.9645%
NSP4:T295I	3	1,933	10.71%	0.1226%
S:Q493K	3	59	10.71%	0.0037%
S:Δ67 region	2	292,969	7.14%	18.5783%
S:S13I	2	211	7.14%	0.0134%
NSP12:V792I	2	10	7.14%	0.0006%
NSP3:P822L	2	28,410	7.14%	1.8016%
NSP3:T820I	2	442	7.14%	0.0280%
NSP3:T504P	2	18	7.14%	0.0011%
S:L452R	2	1,010,866	7.14%	64.1029%
S:Q498R	2	225	7.14%	0.0143%
S:E484G	2	46	7.14%	0.0029%
S:Δ243 region	2	546	7.14%	0.0346%
S:F486I	2	6	7.14%	0.0004%
S:G142V	2	1,361	7.14%	0.0863%
S:T95I	2	682,286	7.14%	43.2664%
NSP3:K977Q	2	391	7.14%	0.0248%
S:F490L	2	463	7.14%	0.0294%

The sharp rise of S:E484K occurrences early in the period is biased due to the data from [Jensen et al. \(2021\)](#) as a result of their sampling strategy and research focus. [Jensen et al. \(2021\)](#) specifically discussed the emergence of S:E484K in long-term immunocompromised patients and published short periods of surveillance of these cases when the patients in question had significantly longer shedding periods to demonstrate this. However, even if this study is excluded S:E484K remains the most frequently occurring DNM within spike.

The high frequency of the S:E484K occurrences is suggestive of a strong selective pressure; this is further demonstrated by the total of twelve DNMs observed at the S:484 locus. The two occurrences of S:E484G in the dataset also suggest that the glycine substitution is subject to differing selection pressures than the lysine substitution in S:E484K although this may be host dependent. In one of the two occurrences of S:E484G this change was transient and was replaced by S:E484K. There are two possible explanations for this observation: a secondary mutation or both

Table 2. Recurrent mutations which are variant defining based upon United Kingdom Health Security Agency (UKHSA) variant definitions. Variant definitions were parsed from the UKHSA variant definition files available at: https://github.com/phe-genomics/variant_definitions. Lineages were called using pangolin (O’Toole et al. 2021b).

Mutation annotation	Pango lineage	UKHSA label	WHO label
NSP3:K977Q	P.1	VOC-21JAN-02	Gamma
NSP3:P822L	AV.1	VUI-21MAY-01	n/a
S:E484K	B.1.351	VOC-20DEC-02	Beta
S:E484K	B.1.525	VUI-21FEB-03	Eta
S:E484K	P.1	VOC-21JAN-02	Gamma
S:E484K	A.23.1	VUI-21FEB-01	n/a
S:E484K	AV.1	VUI-21MAY-01	n/a
S:E484K	B.1.1.318	VUI-21FEB-04	n/a
S:E484K	B.1.1.7	VOC-21FEB-02	n/a
	(with E484K)		
S:E484K	B.1.324.1	VUI-21MAR-01	n/a
S:E484K	P.3	VUI-21MAR-02	Theta
S:E484K	P.2	VUI-21JAN-01	Zeta
S:E484K	B.1.621	VUI-21JUL-01	n/a
S:L452R	B.1.617.2	VOC-21APR-02	Delta
S:L452R	B.1.617.1	VUI-21APR-01	Kappa
S:L452R	B.1.617.3	VUI-21APR-03	n/a
S:L452R	C.36.3	VUI-21MAY-02	n/a
S:Q498R	BA.1	VOC-21NOV-01	Omicron
S:T95I	AV.1	VUI-21MAY-01	n/a
S:T95I	B.1.1.318	VUI-21FEB-04	n/a
S:T95I	B.1.621	VUI-21JUL-01	n/a
S:Δ67 region/RDR1	B.1.1.7	VOC-20DEC-01	Alpha
S:Δ138 region/RDR2	B.1.1.7	VOC-20DEC-01	Alpha
S:Δ138 region/RDR2	AV.1	VUI-21MAY-01	n/a
S:Δ138 region/RDR2	B.1.1.318	VUI-21FEB-04	n/a
S:Δ243 region/RDR4	C.37	VUI-21JUN-01	Lambda

mutations occurred within the patient and the S:E484K subpopulation outcompeted the S:E484G population to become dominant. There is no single nucleotide change by which a G → K AA change might occur, supporting the second possibility. If the second explanation is correct it would suggest that S:484 mutations are selected for generally. The large difference between the frequency of S:E484K in this dataset compared to the national COG-UK dataset further suggests that the selection pressures which caused S:E484K to be so frequent within this analysis are not true of the majority of hosts (Table 1). S:E484K is also considered a defining mutation for a large number of variants, further indicating a strong selection pressure for the mutation (Table 2). Despite its presence within a large number of variants it is only present within a small proportion of the COG-UK dataset suggesting that on a population level it may have a deleterious effect on transmission. Although this may be explained by other factors such as variants with S:E484K not being common in the UK generally.

A strong selective pressure for S:E484K was also observed by Zahradník et al. (2021) who discovered using an *in vitro* experimental evolution model, that >70 per cent of clones in one library gained S:E484K and S:N501Y which were associated with a significant increase in ACE2 affinity. Furthermore they observed the occurrence of the mutation S:Q498R alongside S:N501Y in two repeats, this combination was observed to lead to significantly greater affinity to ACE2 compared to both wild-type and Alpha which rose further alongside S:E484K. This combination was only

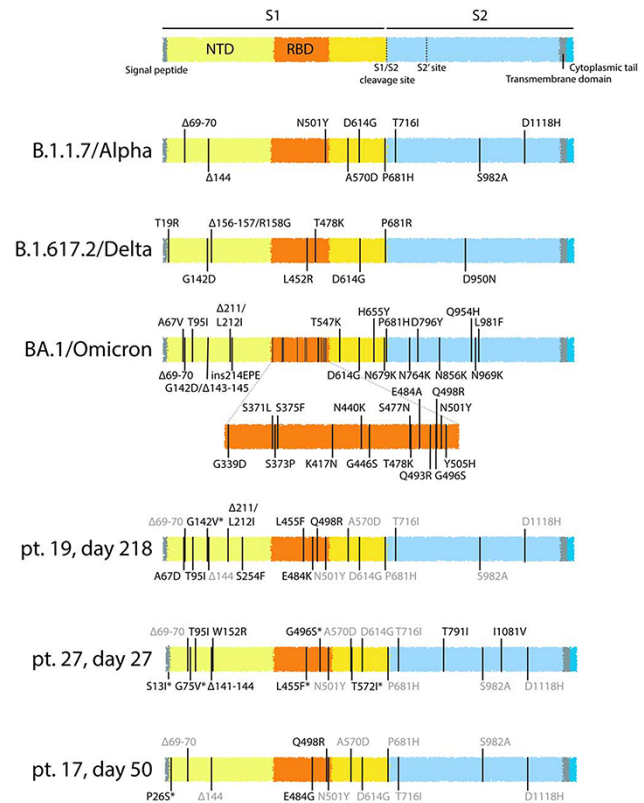


Figure 5. Spike mutational profiles of particular interest described by this study. Select spikes from late sequencing of three long-term Alpha infections shown as Spike schematics. Spike variants from WT Alpha, Delta, and BA.1 Omicron shown for comparison. Mutations shown in grey are existing lineage-defining Alpha mutations. Mutations marked with an asterisk indicate mixed, but resolvable bases in the sequence.

observed within a single patient (patient 19) although the combination E484G, Q498R, and N501Y did arise in a further patient (patient 17); in both cases the infections were Alpha and therefore already possessed S:N501Y. At the time of this publication that constellation of mutations had not been observed in wild virus but with the emergence of Omicron, this combination has become significantly more frequent (albeit with E484A rather than E484K).

The low occurrence frequency of S:N501Y compared to that observed by Zahradník et al. (2021) is also notable but is partly explained by its high (nine out of twenty-eight) day 0 frequency in the genome series, due to the high amount of long-term Alpha infections included in this study. When DNMs were clustered by AA locus S:501 was highlighted as recurrent, however.

Another notable observation is the two *de novo* occurrences of S:L452R (a defining mutation of Delta, Kappa, and Epsilon variants) which aids both immune evasion and ACE2 affinity (Motozono et al. 2021).

S:Q493K has previously been identified by Huang et al. (2021) as a highly beneficial adaptation to a mouse host, improving spike binding affinity to murine ACE2 (Huang et al. 2021), its rarity in the overall SARS-CoV-2 population (58 in COG-UK dataset) suggests that it is not strongly selected for in a human host generally. The three occurrences in this dataset may suggest that S:Q493K does confer a benefit to the virus within the context of a long-term infection but not in transient infection. A highly similar mutation, S:Q493R, is a defining mutation of the Omicron variant.

S:F486I has been observed to decrease the affinity of some neutralising antibodies to spike protein (Xu et al. 2021), and may decrease the affinity of spike to ACE2 (Clark et al. 2021). S:F486I has furthermore been associated with mink adaptation (Zhou et al. 2021). S:490L has been observed to reduce the affinity of multiple mAbs as well as decrease the neutralisation sensitivity of pseudovirus to convalescent sera, however, it does not appear to have an impact on viral infectivity (Li et al. 2020). It is noteworthy that a large number of mutations described in this present study are associated with enhanced human ACE2 affinity including Q493K, Q498R and N501Y (Starr et al. 2020).

When AA loci clustering was performed recurrent DNMs at S:330 and S:440 were observed.

Finally, although most of this study has considered mutations in isolation, several of the late stage long-term infections showed interesting combinations of mutations, particularly within Spike (Fig. 5). Patient 19 for example was an Alpha infection that had picked up a large number of mutations, many of which were in common with, or similar to Omicron, for example S:A67D, S:G142V, S:T95I, S:Δ210/S:L212I, S:E484K, and S:Q498R. A further case, patient 17 also contained S:E484G and S:Q498R alongside the Alpha lineage-defining mutation, S:N501Y and patient 27 contained S:T95I, a further deletion at S:Δ138 region and S:G496S, in common with Omicron.

S-gene N-terminal domain recurrent mutations

S:T95I has been shown to bind to the human Tyrosine-protein kinase receptor UFO (AXL) and it has been suggested by (Singh et al. 2021) that AXL facilitates SARS-CoV-2 cell entry to the same extent as ACE2 in AXL overexpressed cell culture. NTD also has a substantial role in the antigenicity of spike with multiple escape mutations identified in this domain (Harvey et al. 2021).

All recurrent deletions within the SARS-CoV-2 genome were observed within the NTD (S:Δ67 region/RDR1, S:Δ138/RDR2 region, and S:Δ243/RDR4 region). Deletions within the S:69–70 region are commonly observed (McCarthy et al. 2021; Meng et al. 2021). Meng et al. (2021) characterised the common S:Δ69–70 deletion as contributing to infectivity by improving incorporation of cleaved spike protein into virions and possibly has a compensatory effect on mutations in the RBD associated with Ab escape such as S:N439K and S:Y453F. Of the two observations of deletions within the S:67–70 region, one was S:Δ69–70 whereas the other was S:Δ67 which has not been commonly observed, but it is notable that the genome series in which S:Δ67 was observed already possessed S:Δ69 at day 0. S:Δ69–70 is also a defining mutation of the Alpha and Omicron variants and is responsible for the S-gene target failure observed in the PCR testing of alpha variant samples with TaqPath SARS-CoV-2 PCR kits (Kidd et al. 2021).

De novo occurrences of slightly differing deletions within the S:Δ138/RDR2 region were observed four times. This region makes up part of the 'NTD antigenic supersite' which is the majority of neutralising antibodies against the NTD target (McCallum et al. 2021b). S:Δ140 has consequently been associated with a significant decrease in Ab neutralisation (Andreano et al. 2021; Liu et al. 2021). Based on the high number of occurrences, it appears likely that deletions in this region confer some benefit to the virus during long-term infections. As with S:N501Y, as well as S:Δ67 region, it is worth noting a substantial proportion of long-term infections already carried deletions in the S:Δ138 region at day 0 due to being the Alpha variant.

Two occurrences of S:Δ243, another NTD supersite mutation, were also observed, another deletion that has been demonstrated to decrease Ab neutralisation *in vitro* (McCarthy et al. 2021; McCallum et al. 2021b).

S-gene SP recurrent mutations

The single recurrent SP DNM, S:S13I, has been previously shown to mediate a shift of the cleavage site of the SP which in turn facilitates immune evasion by causing a significant re-arrangement of the NTD antigenic supersite and its constituent internal disulphide bonding (McCallum et al. 2021a, 2021b).

E-gene recurrent mutations

The most frequent DNM observed outside of the spike gene is Envelope:T30I (the second most frequent mutation overall after S:E484X). This mutation was observed by Chaudhry et al. (2020) in a cell-culture passage experiment, where it conferred a growth advantage in Calu-3 cells but slowed growth in Vero E6 cells (Chaudhry et al. 2020).

The high frequency of E:T30I is strongly suggestive of a selective pressure during long-term infections and further suggests that the conditions experienced by the virus in immunocompromised patients may exist in a similar selective environment as cell culture, potentially due to a lack of stability needed for transmission. The significant enrichment of E:T30I in this analysis compared to the COG-UK dataset (Table 2) suggests that E:T30I may be a deleterious mutation within the circulating SARS-CoV-2 population. A single variant lineage, B.1.616, does contain E:T30I as a lineage-defining mutation. Interestingly, B.1.616 was associated with an extremely localised, largely nosocomial-associated outbreak, suggesting the possibility this may have been the emergence of a virus from a long-term infection (Fillâtre et al. 2021). This also raises the hypothetical possibility that E:T30I may be considered a marker of long-term SARS-CoV-2 infections. Further study is necessary to determine the phenotypic effect of this mutation and its role in influencing within- and between-host fitness.

ORF1ab-NSP3 recurrent mutations

Literature concerning mutations in ORF1ab is generally observational rather than experimental due to the current lack of tractable models to study them *in vitro*. The concentration of higher frequency mutations within the NSP3 gene is not surprising considering it is the largest gene within the ORF1ab polyprotein and is known to be a bulky, modular protein that may have some flexible linker regions which are fairly hypermutable. Stanevich et al identified NSP3:T504P as a mutation associated with cytotoxic T cell epitope immune escape (Stanevich et al. 2021).

Conclusions

This work sought to determine recurrent mutations across the SARS-CoV-2 genome associated with long-term infections in immunodeficient patients. This study has several notable limitations: importantly a significant publication bias is likely to be present which may overemphasise the importance of some mutations. S:E484K especially is affected by this, the six genome series obtained from Jensen et al. (2021) were published to demonstrate the emergence of S:E484K within immunocompromised patients. Further work will attempt to avoid this by utilising less-biased sampling strategies from long-term infected patients, requiring a prospective study design that aims to regularly sample genomes from long-term infected patients. Another potential limitation is

the use of the COG-UK dataset (Nicholls et al. 2021) as a background dataset considering that ten out of twenty-eight patients were located within the UK (Table 1). The COG-UK dataset is limited to SARS-CoV-2 genomes collected within the UK, but was still used due to the richness of associated metadata within this dataset as well as programmatic access to variant database information provided via CLIMB-COVID (Nicholls et al. 2021). It is also likely that DNMs occurred before the day 0 genomes for the genome series, but without genome sequences it is difficult to judge whether any observed, non-lineage defining mutations occurred within the patient or prior to their infection.

The majority of recurrently observed DNMs have been associated with immune escape, increased ACE2 affinity, or improved viral packaging and are generally not highly prevalent within the wider SARS-CoV-2 population (with the exception of some SARS-CoV-2 variants). Many recurrent DNMs identified in this work have been observed to occur during experiments investigating spike selection in various models as well as efforts to identify immune escape mutations.

These factors suggest that the conditions during long-term infections at least partly select for mutations which aid the virus with *intra*-host replication (cell–cell transmission) and persistence as opposed to the general SARS-CoV-2 population, where mutations which aid *inter*-host transmission are more strongly selected for. E:T30I in particular is worthy of further study as a potential marker of long-term SARS-CoV-2 infections.

However, the large number of occurrences overlapping with variant defining mutations observed does indicate that patients within this category should not be discounted as a potential source of previous, or indeed future variants. The potential of mutations which aid cell–cell transmission within the host or improve viral packaging may affect virulence and any mutations within this category which do not impact viral transmissibility could have a significant impact. This is highly relevant as many of the most abundant mutations described in this dataset are found across many variant lineages. Furthermore, it is possible sub-neutralising levels of antibodies which may be present in some cases (either homologous or from heterologous convalescent or monoclonal antibody treatments) could be selecting for the acquisition of antigenic mutations observed (Kemp et al. 2021).

At present it is unresolved where SARS-CoV-2 variants emerged from. One prevailing hypothesis is that some variants emerged from long-term chronic infections, generating novel advantageous combinations of mutations without the stringent selection pressure of transmission, eventually resulting in an outbreak and onward transmission. We have compared common mutations arising during chronic infections and described how many are shared with SARS-CoV-2 variant lineages. Furthermore we present evidence, based on a rare mutational signature, that the French B.1.616 variant lineage arose from a direct and recent spillover from a chronic infection. Overall the data presented here is consistent and supportive of the chronic infection hypothesis of SARS-CoV-2 variant emergence. Therefore we suggest identifying and curing chronic infections, preferably with combined antiviral therapy as would be used for more traditionally chronic viruses Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) both to the infected individual, but also to global health. *Intra*-host variation of SARS-CoV-2 is likely to play a significant role within this patient group however the lack of raw data availability for the majority of the samples within this dataset makes this challenging (Chaudhry et al. 2020).

We anticipate this dataset will be maintained as a public resource to enable the study of long-term SARS-CoV-2 infections

in immunodeficient patients for as long as it is deemed relevant to enable other researchers to contribute to this understudied, highly important, patient group (https://github.com/BioWilko/recurrent-sars-cov-2-mutations/blob/main/dataset/mutation_calls.csv).

Supplementary data

Supplementary data are available at *Virus Evolution* online.

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Appendix

Queen Elizabeth Hospital, University Hospitals Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TH, UK.

- Mark Garvey, Anna Casey, Liz Ratcliffe, Husam Osman
- Contact: Anna.Casey@uhb.nhs.uk

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- Bina Choi, M.D., Manish C. Choudhary, Ph.D., James Regan, B.S., Jeffrey A. Sparks, M.D., Robert F. Padera, M.D., Ph.D.: **Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, MA.** Xueting Qiu, Ph.D.: **Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, MA.** Isaac H. Solomon, M.D., Ph.D.: **Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, MA.** Hsiao-Hsuan Kuo, Ph.D., Julie Boucau, Ph.D., Kathryn Bowman, M.D., U. Das Adhikari, Ph.D.: **Ragon Institute of MGH, MIT, and Harvard, Cambridge, MA.** Marisa L. Winkler, M.D., Ph.D., Alisa A. Mueller, M.D., Ph.D., Tiffany Y.-T. Hsu, M.D., Ph.D., Michaël Desjardins, M.D., Lindsey R. Baden, M.D., Brian T. Chan, M.D., M.P.H.: **Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, MA.** Bruce D. Walker, M.D.: **Ragon Institute of MGH, MIT, and Harvard, Cambridge, MA.** Mathias Lichtenfeld, M.D., Ph.D., Manfred Brigl, M.D.: **Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, MA.** Douglas S. Kwon, M.D., Ph.D.: **Ragon Institute of MGH, MIT, and Harvard, Cambridge, MA.** Sanjat Kanjilal, M.D., M.P.H.: **Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, MA.** Eugene T. Richardson, M.D., Ph.D.: **Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA.** A. Helena Jonsson, M.D., Ph.D.:

- Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, MA. Galit Alter, Ph.D., Amy K. Barczak, M.D.: **Ragon Institute of MGH, MIT and Harvard, Cambridge, MA.** William P. Hanage, Ph.D.: **Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, MA.** Xu G. Yu, M.D., Gaurav D. Gaiha, M.D., D.Phil.: **Ragon Institute of MGH, MIT and Harvard, Cambridge, MA.** Michael S. Seaman, Ph.D.: **Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Boston, MA.** Manuela Cernadas, M.D., Jonathan Z. Li, M.D.: **Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, MA.**
- Contact: Manuela Cernadas
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 - Contact: hassantarhini01@gmail.com
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 - Contact: rkg20@cam.ac.uk
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 - Contact: elham.khatamzas@med.uni-muenchen.de
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 - Contact: j.paulo.gomes@insa.min-saude.pt
- Virology Department, NHS East and South East London Pathology Partnership, Royal London Hospital, Barts Health NHS Trust:

- Beatrix Kele, Kathryn Harris, Theresa Cutino-Moguel, Dola Owoyemi, Shahiba Sultanam, Abril Romero.
- Contact: beatrix.kele@nhs.net

Ciuffreda, L., Lorenzo-Salazar, J.M., Alcoba-Florez, J., Rodriguez-Pérez, H., Gil-Campesino, H., et al., 2021. Longitudinal study of a SARS-CoV-2 infection in an immunocompromised patient with X-linked agammaglobulinemia. *J. Infect.* 0. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jinf.2021.07.028>

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- Contact: cflores@ull.edu.es

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- Contact: bjoern-erikole.jensen@med.uni-duesseldorf.de

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- Contact: marcus.panning@uniklinik-freiburg.de & georg.kochs@uniklinik-freiburg.de

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Funding acquisition, Leadership and supervision, Metadata curation, Project administration, Samples and logistics, Sequencing and analysis, Software and analysis tools, and Visualisation:

Samuel C Robson ^{13,84}

Funding acquisition, Leadership and supervision, Metadata curation, Project administration, Samples and logistics, Sequencing and analysis, and Software and analysis tools:

Thomas R Connor ^{11,74} and Nicholas J Loman ⁴³

Leadership and supervision, Metadata curation, Project administration, Samples and logistics, Sequencing and analysis, Software and analysis tools, and Visualisation:

Tanya Golubchik ⁵

Funding acquisition, Leadership and supervision, Metadata curation, Samples and logistics, Sequencing and analysis, and Visualisation:

Rocio T Martinez Nunez ⁴⁶

Funding acquisition, Leadership and supervision, Project administration, Samples and logistics, Sequencing and analysis, and Software and analysis tools:

David Bonsall ⁵

Funding acquisition, Leadership and supervision, Project administration, Sequencing and analysis, Software and analysis tools, and Visualisation:

Andrew Rambaut ¹⁰⁴

Funding acquisition, Metadata curation, Project administration, Samples and logistics, Sequencing and analysis, and Software and analysis tools:

Luke B Snell ¹²

Leadership and supervision, Metadata curation, Project administration, Samples and logistics, Software and analysis tools, and Visualisation:

Rich Livett ¹¹⁶

Funding acquisition, Leadership and supervision, Metadata curation, Project administration, and Samples and logistics:

Catherine Ludden ^{20,70}

Funding acquisition, Leadership and supervision, Metadata curation, Samples and logistics, and Sequencing and analysis:

Sally Corden ⁷⁴ and Eleni Nastouli ^{96,95,30}

Funding acquisition, Leadership and supervision, Metadata curation, Sequencing and analysis, and Software and analysis tools:

Gaia Nebbia ¹²

Funding acquisition, Leadership and supervision, Project administration, Samples and logistics, and Sequencing and analysis:

Ian Johnston ¹¹⁶

Leadership and supervision, Metadata curation, Project administration, Samples and logistics, and Sequencing and analysis:

Katrina Lythgoe ⁵, M. Estee Torok ^{19,20} and Ian G Goodfellow ²⁴

Leadership and supervision, Metadata curation, Project administration, Samples and logistics, and Visualisation:

Jacqui A Prieto ^{97,82} and Kordo Saeed ^{97,83}

Leadership and supervision, Metadata curation, Project administration, Sequencing and analysis, and Software and analysis tools:

David K Jackson ¹¹⁶

Leadership and supervision, Metadata curation, Samples and logistics, Sequencing and analysis, and Visualisation:

Catherine Houlihan ^{96,94}

Leadership and supervision, Metadata curation, Sequencing and analysis, Software and analysis tools, and Visualisation:

Dan Frampton ^{94,95}

Metadata curation, Project administration, Samples and logistics, Sequencing and analysis, and Software and analysis tools:

William L Hamilton ¹⁹ and Adam A Witney ⁴¹

Funding acquisition, Samples and logistics, Sequencing and analysis, and Visualisation:

Giselda Bucca ¹⁰¹

Funding acquisition, Leadership and supervision, Metadata curation, and Project administration:

Cassie F Pope ^{40,41}

Funding acquisition, Leadership and supervision, Metadata curation, and Samples and logistics:

Catherine Moore ⁷⁴

Funding acquisition, Leadership and supervision, Metadata curation, and Sequencing and analysis:

Emma C Thomson ⁵³

Funding acquisition, Leadership and supervision, Project administration, and Samples and logistics:

Ewan M Harrison ^{116,102}

Funding acquisition, Leadership and supervision, Sequencing and analysis, and Visualisation:

Colin P Smith ¹⁰¹

Leadership and supervision, Metadata curation, Project administration, and Sequencing and analysis:

Fiona Rogan ⁷⁷

Leadership and supervision, Metadata curation, Project administration, and Samples and logistics:

Shaun M Beckwith ⁶, Abigail Murray ⁶, Dawn Singleton ⁶, Kirstine Eastick ³⁷, Liz A Sheridan ⁹⁸, Paul Randell ⁹⁹, Leigh M Jackson ¹⁰⁵, Cristina V Ariani ¹¹⁶ and Sónia Gonçalves ¹¹⁶

Leadership and supervision, Metadata curation, Samples and logistics, and Sequencing and analysis:

Derek J Fairley ^{3,77}, Matthew W Loose ¹⁸ and Joanne Watkins ⁷⁴

Leadership and supervision, Metadata curation, Samples and logistics, and Visualisation:

Samuel Moses ^{25,106}

Leadership and supervision, Metadata curation, Sequencing and analysis, and Software and analysis tools:

Sam Nicholls ⁴³, Matthew Bull ⁷⁴ and Roberto Amato ¹¹⁶

Leadership and supervision, Project administration, Samples and logistics, and Sequencing and analysis:

Darren L Smith ^{36,65,66}

Leadership and supervision, Sequencing and analysis, Software and analysis tools, and Visualisation:

David M Aanensen ^{14,116} and Jeffrey C Barrett ¹¹⁶

Metadata curation, Project administration, Samples and logistics, and Sequencing and analysis:

Dinesh Aggarwal ^{20,116,70}, James G Shepherd ⁵³, Martin D Curran ⁷¹ and Surendra Parmar ⁷¹

Metadata curation, Project administration, Sequencing and analysis, and Software and analysis tools:

Matthew D Parker ¹⁰⁹

Metadata curation, Samples and logistics, Sequencing and analysis, and Software and analysis tools:

Catryn Williams ⁷⁴

Metadata curation, Samples and logistics, Sequencing and analysis, and Visualisation:

Sharon Glaysher ⁶⁸

Metadata curation, Sequencing and analysis, Software and analysis tools, and Visualisation:

Anthony P Underwood ^{14,116}, Matthew Bashton ^{36,65}, Nicole Pacchiarini ⁷⁴, Katie F Loveson ⁸⁴ and Matthew Byott ^{95,96}

Project administration, Sequencing and analysis, Software and analysis tools, and Visualisation:

Alessandro M Carabelli ²⁰

Funding acquisition, Leadership and supervision, and Metadata curation:

Kate E Templeton ^{56,104}

Funding acquisition, Leadership and supervision, and Project administration:

Thushan I de Silva ¹⁰⁹, Dennis Wang ¹⁰⁹, Cordelia F Langford ¹¹⁶ and John Sillitoe ¹¹⁶

Funding acquisition, Leadership and supervision, and Samples and logistics:

Rory N Gunson ⁵⁵

Funding acquisition, Leadership and supervision, and Sequencing and analysis:

Simon Cottrell⁷⁴, Justin O'Grady^{75, 103} and Dominic Kwiatkowski^{116, 108}

Leadership and supervision, Metadata curation, and Project administration:

Patrick J Lillie³⁷

Leadership and supervision, Metadata curation, and Samples and logistics:

Nicholas Cortes³³, Nathan Moore³³, Claire Thomas³³, Phillipa J Burns³⁷, Tabitha W Mahungu⁸⁰ and Steven Liggett⁸⁶

Leadership and supervision, Metadata curation, and Sequencing and analysis:

Angela H Beckett^{13, 81} and Matthew TG Holden⁷³

Leadership and supervision, Project administration, and Samples and logistics:

Lisa J Levett³⁴, Husam Osman^{70, 35} and Mohammed O Hassan-Ibrahim⁹⁹

Leadership and supervision, Project administration, and Sequencing and analysis:

David A Simpson⁷⁷

Leadership and supervision, Samples and logistics, and Sequencing and analysis:

Meera Chand⁷², Ravi K Gupta¹⁰², Alistair C Darby¹⁰⁷ and Steve Paterson¹⁰⁷

Leadership and supervision, Sequencing and analysis, and Software and analysis tools:

Oliver G Pybus²³, Erik M Volz³⁹, Daniela de Angelis⁵², David L Robertson⁵³, Andrew J Page⁷⁵ and Inigo Martincorena¹¹⁶

Leadership and supervision, Sequencing and analysis, and Visualisation:

Louise Aigrain¹¹⁶ and Andrew R Bassett¹¹⁶

Metadata curation, Project administration, and Samples and logistics:

Nick Wong⁵⁰, Yusri Taha⁸⁹, Michelle J Erkiert⁹⁹ and Michael H Spencer Chapman^{116, 102}

Metadata curation, Project administration, and Sequencing and analysis:

Rebecca Dewar⁵⁶ and Martin P McHugh^{56, 111}

Metadata curation, Project administration, and Software and analysis tools:

Siddharth Mookerjee^{38, 57}

Metadata curation, Project administration, and Visualisation:

Stephen Aplin⁹⁷, Matthew Harvey⁹⁷, Thea Sass⁹⁷, Helen Umpleby⁹⁷ and Helen Wheeler⁹⁷

Metadata curation, Samples and logistics, and Sequencing and analysis:

James P McKenna³, Ben Warne⁹, Joshua F Taylor²², Yasmin Chaudhry²⁴, Rhys Izuagbe²⁴, Aminu S Jahun²⁴, Gregory R Young^{36, 65}, Claire McMurray⁴³, Clare M McCann^{65, 66}, Andrew Nelson^{65, 66} and Scott Elliott⁶⁸

Metadata curation, Samples and logistics, and Visualisation:

Hannah Lowe²⁵

Metadata curation, Sequencing and analysis, and Software and analysis tools:

Anna Price¹¹, Matthew R Crown⁶⁵, Sara Rey⁷⁴, Sunando Roy⁹⁶ and Ben Temperton¹⁰⁵

Metadata curation, Sequencing and analysis, and Visualisation:

Sharif Shaaban⁷³ and Andrew R Hesketh¹⁰¹

Project administration, Samples and logistics, and Sequencing and analysis:

Kenneth G Laing⁴¹, Irene M Monahan⁴¹ and Judith Heaney^{95, 96, 34}

Project administration, Samples and logistics, and Visualisation:

Emanuela Pelosi⁹⁷, Siona Silveira⁹⁷ and Eleri Wilson-Davies⁹⁷

Samples and logistics, Software and analysis tools, and Visualisation:

Helen Fryer⁵

Sequencing and analysis, Software and analysis tools, and Visualisation:

Helen Adams⁴, Louis du Plessis²³, Rob Johnson³⁹, William T Harvey^{53, 42}, Joseph Hughes⁵³, Richard J Orton⁵³, Lewis G Spurgin⁵⁹, Yann Bourgeois⁸¹, Chris Ruis¹⁰², Áine O'Toole¹⁰⁴, Marina Gourtovaia¹¹⁶ and Theo Sanderson¹¹⁶

Funding acquisition, and Leadership and supervision:

Christophe Fraser⁵, Jonathan Edgeworth¹², Judith Breuer^{96, 29}, Stephen L Michell¹⁰⁵ and John A Todd¹¹⁵

Funding acquisition, and Project administration:

Michaela John¹⁰ and David Buck¹¹⁵

Leadership and supervision, and Metadata curation:

Kavitha Gajee³⁷ and Gemma L Kay⁷⁵

Leadership and supervision, and Project administration:

Sharon J Peacock^{20, 70} and David Heyburn⁷⁴

Leadership and supervision, and Samples and logistics:

Katie Kitchman³⁷, Alan McNally^{43,93}, David T Pritchard⁵⁰, Samir Dervisevic⁵⁸, Peter Muir⁷⁰, Esther Robinson^{70,35}, Barry B Vipond⁷⁰, Newara A Ramadan⁷⁸, Christopher Jeanes⁹⁰, Danni Weldon¹¹⁶, Jana Catalan¹¹⁸ and Neil Jones¹¹⁸

Leadership and supervision, and Sequencing and analysis:

Ana da Silva Filipe⁵³, Chris Williams⁷⁴, Marc Fuchs⁷⁷, Julia Miskelly⁷⁷, Aaron R Jeffries¹⁰⁵, Karen Oliver¹¹⁶ and Naomi R Park¹¹⁶

Metadata curation, and Samples and logistics:

Amy Ash¹, Cherian Koshy¹, Magdalena Barrow⁷, Sarah L Buchan⁷, Anna Mantzouratou⁷, Gemma Clark¹⁵, Christopher W Holmes¹⁶, Sharon Campbell¹⁷, Thomas Davis²¹, Ngee Keong Tan²², Julianne R Brown²⁹, Kathryn A Harris^{29,2}, Stephen P Kidd³³, Paul R Grant³⁴, Li Xu-McCrae³⁵, Alison Cox^{38,63}, Pinglawathee Madona^{38,63}, Marcus Pond^{38,63}, Paul A Randell^{38,63}, Karen T Withell⁴⁸, Cheryl Williams⁵¹, Clive Graham⁶⁰, Rebecca Denton-Smith⁶², Emma Swindells⁶², Robyn Turnbull⁶², Tim J Sloan⁶⁷, Andrew Bosworth^{70,35}, Stephanie Hutchings⁷⁰, Hannah M Pymont⁷⁰, Anna Casey⁷⁶, Liz Ratcliffe⁷⁶, Christopher R Jones^{79,105}, Bridget A Knight^{79,105}, Tanzina Haque⁸⁰, Jennifer Hart⁸⁰, Dianne Irish-Tavares⁸⁰, Eric Witele⁸⁰, Craig Mower⁸⁶, Louisa K Watson⁸⁶, Jennifer Collins⁸⁹, Gary Eltringham⁸⁹, Dorian Crudgington⁹⁸, Ben Macklin⁹⁸, Miren Iturriza-Gomara¹⁰⁷, Anita O Lucaci¹⁰⁷ and Patrick C McClure¹¹³

Metadata curation, and Sequencing and analysis:

Matthew Carlile¹⁸, Nadine Holmes¹⁸, Christopher Moore¹⁸, Nathaniel Storey²⁹, Stefan Rooke⁷³, Gonzalo Yebra⁷³, Noel Craine⁷⁴, Malorie Perry⁷⁴, Nabil-Fareed Alikhan⁷⁵, Stephen Bridgett⁷⁷, Kate F Cook⁸⁴, Christopher Fearn⁸⁴, Salman Goudarzi⁸⁴, Ronan A Lyons⁸⁸, Thomas Williams¹⁰⁴, Sam T Haldenby¹⁰⁷, Jillian Durham¹¹⁶ and Steven Leonard¹¹⁶

Metadata curation, and Software and analysis tools:

Robert M Davies¹¹⁶

Project administration, and Samples and logistics:

Rahul Batra¹², Beth Blane²⁰, Moira J Spyer^{30,95,96}, Perminder Smith^{32,112}, Mehmet Yavus^{85,109}, Rachel J Williams⁹⁶, Adhyana IK Mahanama⁹⁷, Buddhini Samaraweera⁹⁷, Sophia T Girgis¹⁰², Samantha E Hansford¹⁰⁹, Angie Green¹¹⁵, Charlotte Beaver¹¹⁶, Katherine L Bellis^{116,102}, Matthew J Dorman¹¹⁶, Sally Kay¹¹⁶, Liam Prestwood¹¹⁶ and Shavanthi Rajatileka¹¹⁶

Project administration, and Sequencing and analysis:

Joshua Quick⁴³

Project administration, and Software and analysis tools:

Radoslaw Poplawski⁴³

Samples and logistics, and Sequencing and analysis:

Nicola Reynolds⁸, Andrew Mack¹¹, Arthur Morriss¹¹, Thomas Whalley¹¹, Bindi Patel¹², Iliana Georgana²⁴, Myra Hosmillo²⁴, Malte L Pinckert²⁴, Joanne Stockton⁴³, John H Henderson⁶⁵, Amy Hollis⁶⁵, William Stanley⁶⁵, Wen C Yew⁶⁵, Richard Myers⁷², Alicia Thornton⁷², Alexander Adams⁷⁴, Tara Annett⁷⁴, Hibo Asad⁷⁴,

Alec Birchley⁷⁴, Jason Coombes⁷⁴, Johnathan M Evans⁷⁴, Laia Fina⁷⁴, Bree Gatica-Wilcox⁷⁴, Lauren Gilbert⁷⁴, Lee Graham⁷⁴, Jessica Hey⁷⁴, Ember Hilvers⁷⁴, Sophie Jones⁷⁴, Hannah Jones⁷⁴, Sara Kumziene-Summerhayes⁷⁴, Caoimhe McKerr⁷⁴, Jessica Powell⁷⁴, Georgia Pugh⁷⁴, Sarah Taylor⁷⁴, Alexander J Trotter⁷⁵, Charlotte A Williams⁹⁶, Leanne M Kermack¹⁰², Benjamin H Foulkes¹⁰⁹, Marta Gallis¹⁰⁹, Hailey R Hornsby¹⁰⁹, Stavroula F Louka¹⁰⁹, Manoj Pohare¹⁰⁹, Paige Wolverson¹⁰⁹, Peijun Zhang¹⁰⁹, George MacIntyre-Cockett¹¹⁵, Amy Trebes¹¹⁵, Robin J Moll¹¹⁶, Lynne Ferguson¹¹⁷, Emily J Goldstein¹¹⁷, Alasdair Maclean¹¹⁷ and Rachael Tomb¹¹⁷

Samples and logistics, and Software and analysis tools:

Igor Starinskij⁵³

Sequencing and analysis, and Software and analysis tools:

Laura Thomson⁵, Joel Southgate^{11,74}, Moritz UG Kraemer²³, Jayna Raghwanji²³, Alex E Zarebski²³, Olivia Boyd³⁹, Lily Geidelberg³⁹, Chris J Illingworth⁵², Chris Jackson⁵², David Pascall⁵², Sreenu Vattipally⁵³, Timothy M Freeman¹⁰⁹, Sharon N Hsu¹⁰⁹, Benjamin B Lindsey¹⁰⁹, Keith James¹¹⁶, Kevin Lewis¹¹⁶, Gerry Tonkin-Hill¹¹⁶ and Jaime M Tovar-Corona¹¹⁶

Sequencing and analysis, and Visualisation:

MacGregor Cox²⁰

Software and analysis tools, and Visualisation:

Khalil Abudahab^{14,116}, Mirko Menegazzo¹⁴, Ben EW Taylor MEng^{14,116}, Corin A Yeats¹⁴, Afrida Mukaddas⁵³, Derek W Wright⁵³, Leonardo de Oliveira Martins⁷⁵, Rachel Colquhoun¹⁰⁴, Verity Hill¹⁰⁴, Ben Jackson¹⁰⁴, JT McCrone¹⁰⁴, Nathan Medd¹⁰⁴, Emily Scher¹⁰⁴ and Jon-Paul Keatley¹¹⁶

Leadership and supervision:

Tanya Curran³, Sian Morgan¹⁰, Patrick Maxwell²⁰, Ken Smith²⁰, Sahar Eldirdiri²¹, Anita Kenyon²¹, Alison H Holmes^{38,57}, James R Price^{38,57}, Tim Wyatt⁶⁹, Alison E Mather⁷⁵, Timofey Skvortsov⁷⁷ and John A Hartley⁹⁶

Metadata curation:

Martyn Guest¹¹, Christine Kitchen¹¹, Ian Merrick¹¹, Robert Munn¹¹, Beatrice Bertolusso³³, Jessica Lynch³³, Gabrielle Vernet³³, Stuart Kirk³⁴, Elizabeth Wastnedge⁵⁶, Rachael Stanley⁵⁸, Giles Idle⁶⁴, Declan T Bradley^{69,77}, Jennifer Poyner⁷⁹ and Matilde Mori¹¹⁰

Project administration:

Owen Jones¹¹, Victoria Wright¹⁸, Ellena Brooks²⁰, Carol M Churcher²⁰, Mireille Fragakis²⁰, Katerina Galai^{20,70}, Andrew Jermy²⁰, Sarah Judges²⁰, Georgina M McManus²⁰, Kim S Smith²⁰, Elaine Westwick²⁰, Stephen W Attwood²³, Frances Bolt^{38,57}, Alisha Davies⁷⁴, Elen De Lacy⁷⁴, Fatima Downing⁷⁴, Sue Edwards⁷⁴, Lizzie Meadows⁷⁵, Sarah Jeremiah⁹⁷, Nikki Smith¹⁰⁹ and Luke Foulser¹¹⁶

Samples and logistics:

Themoula Charalampous^{12,46}, Amita Patel¹², Louise Berry¹⁵, Tim Boswell¹⁵, Vicki M Fleming¹⁵, Hannah C Howson-Wells¹⁵, Amelia Joseph¹⁵, Manjinder Khakh¹⁵, Michelle M Lister¹⁵, Paul W Bird¹⁶, Karlie Fallon¹⁶, Thomas Helmer¹⁶, Claire L McMurray¹⁶, Mina Odedra¹⁶, Jessica Shaw¹⁶, Julian W Tang¹⁶, Nicholas J Willford¹⁶,

Victoria Blakey¹⁷, Veena Raviprakash¹⁷, Nicola Sheriff¹⁷, Lesley-Anne Williams¹⁷, Theresa Feltwell²⁰, Luke Bedford²⁶, James S Cargill²⁷, Warwick Hughes²⁷, Jonathan Moore²⁸, Susanne Stonehouse²⁸, Laura Atkinson²⁹, Jack CD Lee²⁹, Dr Divya Shah²⁹, Adela Alcolea-Medina^{32,112}, Natasha Ohemeng-Kumi^{32,112}, John Ramble^{32,112}, Jasveen Sehmi^{32,112}, Rebecca Williams³³, Wendy Chatterton³⁴, Monika Pusok³⁴, William Everson³⁷, Anibolina Castigador⁴⁴, Emily Macnaughton⁴⁴, Kate El Bouzidi⁴⁵, Temi Lampejo⁴⁵, Malur Sudhanva⁴⁵, Cassie Breen⁴⁷, Graciela Sluga⁴⁸, Shazaad SY Ahmad^{49,70}, Ryan P George⁴⁹, Nicholas W Machin^{49,70}, Debbie Binns⁵⁰, Victoria James⁵⁰, Rachel Blacow⁵⁵, Lindsay Coupland⁵⁸, Louise Smith⁵⁹, Edward Barton⁶⁰, Debra Padgett⁶⁰, Garren Scott⁶⁰, Aidan Cross⁶¹, Mariyam Mirfenderesky⁶¹, Jane Greenaway⁶², Kevin Cole⁶⁴, Phillip Clarke⁶⁷, Nichola Duckworth⁶⁷, Sarah Walsh⁶⁷, Kelly Bicknell⁶⁸, Robert Impey⁶⁸, Sarah Wyllie⁶⁸, Richard Hopes⁷⁰, Chloe Bishop⁷², Vicki Chalker⁷², Ian Harrison⁷², Laura Gifford⁷⁴, Zoltan Molnar⁷⁷, Cressida Auckland⁷⁹, Cariad Evans^{85,109}, Kate Johnson^{85,109}, David G Partridge^{85,109}, Mohammad Raza^{85,109}, Paul Baker⁸⁶, Stephen Bonner⁸⁶, Sarah Essex⁸⁶, Leanne J Murray⁸⁶, Andrew I Lawton⁸⁷, Shirelle Burton-Fanning⁸⁹, Brendan Al Payne⁸⁹, Sheila Waugh⁸⁹, Andrea N Gomes⁹¹, Maimuna Kimuli⁹¹, Darren R Murray⁹¹, Paula Ashfield⁹², Donald Dobie⁹², Fiona Ashford⁹³, Angus Best⁹³, Liam Crawford⁹³, Nicola Cumley⁹³, Megan Mayhew⁹³, Oliver Megram⁹³, Jeremy Mirza⁹³, Emma Moles-Garcia⁹³, Benita Percival⁹³, Megan Driscoll⁹⁶, Leah Ensell⁹⁶, Helen L Lowe⁹⁶, Laurentiu Maftei⁹⁶, Matteo Mondani⁹⁶, Nicola J Chaloner⁹⁹, Benjamin J Cogger⁹⁹, Lisa J Easton⁹⁹, Hannah Huckson⁹⁹, Jonathan Lewis⁹⁹, Sarah Lowdon⁹⁹, Cassandra S Malone⁹⁹, Florence Munemo⁹⁹, Manasa Mutingwende⁹⁹, Roberto Nicodemi⁹⁹, Olga Podplomyk⁹⁹, Thomas Somassa⁹⁹, Andrew Beggs¹⁰⁰, Alex Richter¹⁰⁰, Claire Cormie¹⁰², Joana Dias¹⁰², Sally Forrest¹⁰², Ellen E Higginson¹⁰², Mailis Maes¹⁰², Jamie Young¹⁰², Rose K Davidson¹⁰³, Kathryn A Jackson¹⁰⁷, Lance Turtle¹⁰⁷, Alexander J Keeley¹⁰⁹, Jonathan Ball¹¹³, Timothy Byaruhanga¹¹³, Joseph G Chappell¹¹³, Jayasree Dey¹¹³, Jack D Hill¹¹³, Emily J Park¹¹³, Arezou Fanaie¹¹⁴, Rachel A Hilson¹¹⁴, Geraldine Yaze¹¹⁴ and Stephanie Lo¹¹⁶

Sequencing and analysis:

Safiah Afifi¹⁰, Robert Beer¹⁰, Joshua Maksimovic¹⁰, Kathryn McCluggage¹⁰, Karla Spellman¹⁰, Catherine Bresner¹¹, William Fuller¹¹, Angela Marchbank¹¹, Trudy Workman¹¹, Ekaterina Shelest^{13,81}, Johnny Debebe¹⁸, Fei Sang¹⁸, Marina Escalera Zamudio²³, Sarah Francois²³, Bernardo Gutierrez²³, Tetyana I Vasylyeva²³, Flavia Flaviani³¹, Manon Ragonnet-Cronin³⁹, Katherine L Smollett⁴², Alice Broos⁵³, Daniel Mair⁵³, Jenna Nichols⁵³, Kyriaki Nomikou⁵³, Lily Tong⁵³, Ioulia Tsatsani⁵³, Sarah O'Brien⁵⁴, Steven Rushton⁵⁴, Roy Sanderson⁵⁴, Jon Perkins⁵⁵, Seb Cotton⁵⁶, Abbie Gallagher⁵⁶, Elias Allara^{70,102}, Clare Pearson^{70,102}, David Bibby⁷², Gavin Dabrera⁷², Nicholas Ellaby⁷², Eileen Gallagher⁷², Jonathan Hubb⁷², Angie Lackenby⁷², David Lee⁷², Nikos Manesis⁷², Tamyo Mbisa⁷², Steven Platt⁷², Katherine A Twohig⁷², Mari Morgan⁷⁴, Alp Aydin⁷⁵, David J Baker⁷⁵, Ebenezer Foster-Nyarko⁷⁵, Sophie J Prosolek⁷⁵, Steven Rudder⁷⁵, Chris Baxter⁷⁷, Sílvia F Carvalho⁷⁷, Deborah Lavin⁷⁷, Arun Mariappan⁷⁷, Clara Radulescu⁷⁷, Aditi Singh⁷⁷, Miao Tang⁷⁷, Helen Morcrette⁷⁹, Nadua Bayzid⁹⁶, Marius Cotic⁹⁶, Carlos E Balcazar¹⁰⁴, Michael D Gallagher¹⁰⁴, Daniel Maloney¹⁰⁴, Thomas D Stanton¹⁰⁴, Kathleen A Williamson¹⁰⁴, Robin Manley¹⁰⁵, Michelle L Michelsen¹⁰⁵, Christine M Sambles¹⁰⁵, David J Studholme¹⁰⁵, Joanna Warwick-Dugdale¹⁰⁵, Richard Eccles¹⁰⁷, Matthew Gemmell¹⁰⁷, Richard Gregory¹⁰⁷, Margaret Hughes¹⁰⁷, Charlotte Nelson¹⁰⁷, Lucille Rainbow¹⁰⁷, Edith E Vamos¹⁰⁷,

Hermione J Webster¹⁰⁷, Mark Whitehead¹⁰⁷, Claudia Wierzbicki¹⁰⁷, Adrienn Angyal¹⁰⁹, Luke R Green¹⁰⁹, Max Whiteley¹⁰⁹, Emma Betteridge¹¹⁶, Iraad F Bronner¹¹⁶, Ben W Farr¹¹⁶, Scott Goodwin¹¹⁶, Stefanie V Lensing¹¹⁶, Shane A McCarthy^{116,102}, Michael A Quail¹¹⁶, Diana Rajan¹¹⁶, Nicholas M Redshaw¹¹⁶, Carol Scott¹¹⁶, Lesley Shirley¹¹⁶ and Scott AJ Thurston¹¹⁶

Software and analysis tools:

Will Rowe⁴³, Amy Gaskin⁷⁴, Thanh Le-Viet⁷⁵, James Bonfield¹¹⁶, Jennifer Liddle¹¹⁶ and Andrew Whitwham¹¹⁶

1 Barking, Havering and Redbridge University Hospitals NHS Trust, **2** Barts Health NHS Trust, **3** Belfast Health & Social Care Trust, **4** Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, **5** Big Data Institute, Nuffield Department of Medicine, University of Oxford, **6** Blackpool Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, **7** Bournemouth University, **8** Cambridge Stem Cell Institute, University of Cambridge, **9** Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, **10** Cardiff and Vale University Health Board, **11** Cardiff University, **12** Centre for Clinical Infection and Diagnostics Research, Department of Infectious Diseases, Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust, **13** Centre for Enzyme Innovation, University of Portsmouth, **14** Centre for Genomic Pathogen Surveillance, University of Oxford, **15** Clinical Microbiology Department, Queens Medical Centre, Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust, **16** Clinical Microbiology, University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust, **17** County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust, **18** Deep Seq, School of Life Sciences, Queens Medical Centre, University of Nottingham, **19** Department of Infectious Diseases and Microbiology, Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, **20** Department of Medicine, University of Cambridge, **21** Department of Microbiology, Kettering General Hospital, **22** Department of Microbiology, South West London Pathology, **23** Department of Zoology, University of Oxford, **24** Division of Virology, Department of Pathology, University of Cambridge, **25** East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust, **26** East Suffolk and North Essex NHS Foundation Trust, **27** East Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust, **28** Gateshead Health NHS Foundation Trust, **29** Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Foundation Trust, **30** Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health (GOS ICH), University College London (UCL), **31** Guy's and St. Thomas' Biomedical Research Centre, **32** Guy's and St. Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust, **33** Hampshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, **34** Health Services Laboratories, **35** Heartlands Hospital, Birmingham, **36** Hub for Biotechnology in the Built Environment, Northumbria University, **37** Hull University Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, **38** Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, **39** Imperial College London, **40** Infection Care Group, St George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, **41** Institute for Infection and Immunity, St George's University of London, **42** Institute of Biodiversity, Animal Health & Comparative Medicine, **43** Institute of Microbiology and Infection, University of Birmingham, **44** Isle of Wight NHS Trust, **45** King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, **46** King's College London, **47** Liverpool Clinical Laboratories, **48** Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust, **49** Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust, **50** Microbiology Department, Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust, **51** Microbiology, Royal Oldham Hospital, **52** MRC Biostatistics Unit, University of Cambridge, **53** MRC-University of Glasgow Centre for Virus Research, **54** Newcastle University, **55** NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, **56** NHS Lothian, **57** NIHR Health Protection Research Unit in HCAI and

AMR, Imperial College London, **58** Norfolk and Norwich University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, **59** Norfolk County Council, **60** North Cumbria Integrated Care NHS Foundation Trust, **61** North Middlesex University Hospital NHS Trust, **62** North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Foundation Trust, **63** North West London Pathology, **64** Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, **65** Northumbria University, **66** NU-OMICS, Northumbria University, **67** Path Links, Northern Lincolnshire and Goole NHS Foundation Trust, **68** Portsmouth Hospitals University NHS Trust, **69** Public Health Agency, Northern Ireland, **70** Public Health England, **71** Public Health England, Cambridge, **72** Public Health England, Colindale, **73** Public Health Scotland, **74** Public Health Wales, **75** Quadram Institute Bioscience, **76** Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Birmingham, **77** Queen's University Belfast, **78** Royal Brompton and Harefield Hospitals, **79** Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust, **80** Royal Free London NHS Foundation Trust, **81** School of Biological Sciences, University of Portsmouth, **82** School of Health Sciences, University of Southampton, **83** School of Medicine, University of Southampton, **84** School of Pharmacy & Biomedical Sciences, University of Portsmouth, **85** Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, **86** South Tees Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, **87** Southwest Pathology Services, **88** Swansea University, **89** The Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation

Trust, **90** The Queen Elizabeth Hospital King's Lynn NHS Foundation Trust, **91** The Royal Marsden NHS Foundation Trust, **92** The Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust, **93** Turnkey Laboratory, University of Birmingham, **94** University College London Division of Infection and Immunity, **95** University College London Hospital Advanced Pathogen Diagnostics Unit, **96** University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, **97** University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust, **98** University Hospitals Dorset NHS Foundation Trust, **99** University Hospitals Sussex NHS Foundation Trust, **100** University of Birmingham, **101** University of Brighton, **102** University of Cambridge, **103** University of East Anglia, **104** University of Edinburgh, **105** University of Exeter, **106** University of Kent, **107** University of Liverpool, **108** University of Oxford, **109** University of Sheffield, **110** University of Southampton, **111** University of St Andrews, **112** Viapath, Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust, and King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, **113** Virology, School of Life Sciences, Queens Medical Centre, University of Nottingham, **114** Watford General Hospital, **115** Wellcome Centre for Human Genetics, Nuffield Department of Medicine, University of Oxford, **116** Wellcome Sanger Institute, **117** West of Scotland Specialist Virology Centre, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, **118** Whittington Health NHS Trust.