

Predictors of early relapse in postmenopausal women with hormone receptor-positive breast cancer in the BIG 1-98 trial

L. Mauriac^{1*}, A. Keshaviah², M. Debled³, H. Mouridsen⁴, J. F. Forbes⁵, B. Thürlimann⁶, R. Paridaens⁷, A. Monnier⁸, I. Láng⁹, A. Wardley¹⁰, J.-M. Nogaret¹¹, R. D. Gelber¹², M. Castiglione-Gertsch¹³, K. N. Price¹⁴, A. S. Coates¹⁵, I. Smith¹⁶, G. Viale¹⁷, M. Rabaglio¹³, N. Zabaznyi¹⁸ & A. Goldhirsch¹⁹

On the behalf of BIG 1-98 Collaborative Group and International Breast Cancer Study Group, Berne, Switzerland

¹French Breast Cancer Group, Institut Bergonié Bordeaux, France; ²International Breast Cancer Study Group Statistical Center, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Boston, MA, USA; ³Institut Bergonié, Bordeaux, France; ⁴Danish Breast Cancer Cooperative Group, Rigshospitalet, Copenhagen, Denmark; ⁵Australian New Zealand Breast Cancer Trials Group, University of Newcastle, Newcastle Mater Hospital, Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia; ⁶Senology Center of Eastern Switzerland, Switzerland, Swiss Group for Clinical Cancer Research, Kantonsspital, St Gallen; ⁷University Hospital Gasthuisberg, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium; ⁸Centre Hospitalier Belfort, Montbéliard, France; ⁹National Institute of Oncology, Budapest, Hungary; ¹⁰Christie Hospital NHS Trust, South Manchester University Hospital Trust, Manchester, UK; ¹¹Jules Bordet Institute, Brussels, Belgium; ¹²International Breast Cancer Study Group Statistical Center, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Harvard School of Public Health and Frontier Science and Technology Research Foundation, Boston, MA, USA; ¹³International Breast Cancer Study Group Coordinating Center and Inselspital, Berne, Switzerland; ¹⁴International Breast Cancer Study Group Statistical Center and Frontier Science and Technology Research Foundation, Boston, MA, USA; ¹⁵International Breast Cancer Study Group, Berne, Switzerland and University of Sydney, Australia; ¹⁶The Royal Marsden Hospital, London, UK; ¹⁷European Institute of Oncology, Milan, Italy; ¹⁸Moscow Municipal Oncology Hospital #62, Stepanovskoe, Krasnogorski Province, Moscow Region, Russia; ¹⁹European Institute of Oncology, Milan, Italy and Oncology Institute of Southern Switzerland, Bellinzona, Switzerland

Received 31 October 2006; revised 2 January 2007; accepted 3 January 2007

Background: Aromatase inhibitors are considered standard adjuvant endocrine treatment of postmenopausal women with hormone receptor-positive breast cancer, but it remains uncertain whether aromatase inhibitors should be given upfront or sequentially with tamoxifen. Awaiting results from ongoing randomized trials, we examined prognostic factors of an early relapse among patients in the BIG 1-98 trial to aid in treatment choices.

Patients and methods: Analyses included all 7707 eligible patients treated on BIG 1-98. The median follow-up was 2 years, and the primary end point was breast cancer relapse. Cox proportional hazards regression was used to identify prognostic factors.

Results: Two hundred and eighty-five patients (3.7%) had an early relapse (3.1% on letrozole, 4.4% on tamoxifen). Predictive factors for early relapse were node positivity ($P < 0.001$), absence of both receptors being positive ($P < 0.001$), high tumor grade ($P < 0.001$), HER-2 overexpression/amplification ($P < 0.001$), large tumor size ($P = 0.001$), treatment with tamoxifen ($P = 0.002$), and vascular invasion ($P = 0.02$). There were no significant interactions between treatment and the covariates, though letrozole appeared to provide a greater than average reduction in the risk of early relapse in patients with many involved lymph nodes, large tumors, and vascular invasion present.

Conclusion: Upfront letrozole resulted in significantly fewer early relapses than tamoxifen, even after adjusting for significant prognostic factors.

Key words: adjuvant endocrine therapy, aromatase inhibitor, breast cancer, early relapse, letrozole, prognostic factors

Introduction

The primary core analysis of the BIG 1-98 trial, coordinated by the International Breast Cancer Study Group, compared letrozole to tamoxifen given for 5 years alone or in sequence,

in postmenopausal women with estrogen and/or progesterone receptor (ER/PgR)-positive breast cancer. Patients were randomized from 1998 to 2003 to tamoxifen for 5 years, letrozole for 5 years, tamoxifen for 2 years followed by letrozole for 3 years or letrozole for 2 years followed by tamoxifen for 3 years. A significant benefit of letrozole (19% risk reduction) on disease-free survival was seen, particularly for distant metastasis, at a median follow-up of 25.8 months [1].

*Correspondence to: Dr L. Mauriac, Institut Bergonié 229 cours de l'Argonne, 33076 Bordeaux Cedex, France. Tel: +33-5-56-33-32-58; Fax: +33-5-56-33-32-85; E-mail: mauriac@bergonie.org

A total of five trials have shown that aromatase inhibitors improve disease-free survival compared with tamoxifen alone. ATAC (anastrozole) [2] and BIG 1-98 (letrozole) [1] compared upfront aromatase inhibitor for 5 years to tamoxifen for 5 years. The other three trials, IES (exemestane) [3], ITA (anastrozole) [4], and ABCSG 8-ARNO 95 (anastrozole) [5], compared tamoxifen alone for 5 years to sequential treatment with tamoxifen for 2–3 years and aromatase inhibitor for 2–3 years. While waiting for the definitive results of BIG 1-98 comparing upfront letrozole to sequential treatment, we conducted an exploratory analysis to determine which patients could benefit most from the best treatment to prevent early relapse.

The focus of the present analysis was to retrospectively identify patients who might most benefit from the initial selection of letrozole versus tamoxifen, on the basis of clinical and pathological prognostic factors of early relapse.

patients and methods

The analysis population was comprised of eligible patients randomized to BIG 1-98 and excluded patients who withdrew consent to participate in the trial before initiating treatment. Patients were included according to the treatment to which they were randomized.

The primary end point was breast cancer relapse, defined as the first proven invasive local, contralateral breast, regional, or distant recurrence in any site. Secondly, nonbreast malignancies were ignored and deaths without proven recurrence were censored. Analyses were based on treatment with tamoxifen or letrozole alone; follow-up and events were censored if they occurred beyond 2 years after randomization for patients in the two monotherapy arms, and beyond the date of treatment switch or 2 years after randomization (whichever was earlier) for patients in the sequential treatment arms. The analysis thus focused exclusively on early relapse.

Prognostic factors tested included age at randomization (<55, 55–64, ≥65 years), pathological tumor size (≤2, >2 cm), tumor grade (1, 2, 3, missing), mitotic grade (1, 2, 3, missing), locally assessed ER/PgR status (ER+/PgR+, ER+/PgR–, ER+/PgR unknown, ER–/PgR+), centrally assessed HER-2 status (overexpressed/amplified, normal, missing), axillary node positivity (zero, one to three, four or more positive nodes), and vascular invasion (yes, no, not assessable). All covariates were modeled categorically using indicator variables. Significance for HER-2 status was on the basis of the pairwise comparison of overexpressed versus normal, and significance for vascular invasion was on the basis of the pairwise comparison of yes versus no. Covariates with >5% of values missing were modeled with an indicator for missing values; covariates with ≤5% values were not modeled with an indicator, and patients with missing values for these covariates were excluded from the models.

Cox proportional hazards regression analyses were used to identify significant prognostic factors, and all models included randomized treatment assignment (letrozole, tamoxifen). Only covariates that were significant ‘univariately’ (in a model that also included treatment) were considered in multivariate models. A full multivariate model was then fitted, and a manual backwards selection was conducted. To ensure noncollinearity in multivariate analyses, Spearman rank correlations were examined and Akaike’s Information Criterion (AIC) was used to select between covariates with a correlation >0.50. After the significant main effects were identified, interactions between the main effects and treatment were tested to determine whether the effect of the covariate on the risk of relapse differed according to the treatment the patient initially received; interactions were tested individually to conserve power.

A significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$ was applied throughout without adjustment for multiple comparisons. Verification of the Cox proportional hazards assumption was done through visual inspection of the $\log(-\log(S(t)))$ plot, where $S(t)$ is the survivor function.

results

A total of 7707 of the 8028 patients were included (18 patients withdrew consent to participate before initiating treatment, 133 patients were ineligible, and another 170 had missing covariate values). At a median follow-up of 2 years (range 0.01–2 years), 285 patients (3.7%) had a relapse. Early relapse rates are 3.0% for the letrozole group and 4.4% for the tamoxifen group. The dominant sites of relapse are presented in Table 1 by treatment.

Table 2 gives the breakdown of the covariates by relapse status and also includes information on treatments received (radiotherapy, surgery, and chemotherapy). In ‘univariate’ models (including treatment), age was the only nonsignificant covariate ($P = 0.67$). Tumor grade and mitotic grade had a correlation of 0.60 and virtually identical AIC values; since tumor grade is a more commonly reported characteristic, it was kept in the full multivariate model and mitotic grade was dropped. Node positivity and tumor size had a moderate correlation of 0.26; all other correlations were <16% in magnitude.

The significant prognostic factors in a multivariate analysis were node positivity ($P < 0.001$), lack of both receptors being positive ($P < 0.001$), tumor grade ($P < 0.001$), HER-2 expression/amplification ($P < 0.001$), tumor size ($P = 0.001$), endocrine treatment ($P = 0.002$), and vascular invasion ($P = 0.02$). The results from the final multivariate Cox regression model are presented in Table 3. Increasing tumor grade resulted in an increased risk of relapse. Risk of relapse by combined receptor status ranked as follows: ER–/PgR+ > ER+/PgR– > ER+/PgR unknown > ER+/PgR+. Patients with vascular invasion had a greater risk of relapse than those without; tumor with no assessable vascular invasion had an intermediate risk. Risk of relapse was greatest for patients with a high number of involved nodes, those with larger tumors, and those with HER-2 overexpressed/amplified tumors. There were no major violations of the proportional hazards assumption.

Letrozole resulted in a significant reduction in early relapse, even after adjusting for significant prognostic factors. Figure 1 shows average semiannual hazards of early relapse by treatment.

Table 1. Sites of early relapse by treatment

Site of early relapse	Treatment			
	Letrozole (N = 3863)		Tamoxifen (N = 3844)	
	N	%	N	%
Local	12	0.3	23	0.6
Contralateral breast	11	0.3	15	0.4
Regional	7	0.2	5	0.1
Distant	87	2.3	125	3.3
Soft tissue	3	<0.1	7	0.2
Bone	39	1.0	57	1.5
Viscera	45	1.2	61	1.6

Table 2. Covariates according to whether or not an early relapse occurred

	Early relapse			
	No (N = 7422)		Yes (N = 285)	
	N	%	N	%
Treatment				
Letrozole	3746	97.0	117	3.0
Tamoxifen	3676	95.6	168	4.4
Age at randomization				
<55 years	1399	96.3	53	3.7
55–64 years	3392	96.5	124	3.5
≥65 years	2631	96.1	108	3.9
Tumor size				
≤2cm	4711	97.8	108	2.2
>2cm	2711	93.9	177	6.1
Tumor grade				
Grade 1	2015	98.2	36	1.8
Grade 2	3650	96.6	127	3.4
Grade 3	1092	92.8	85	7.2
Missing	665	94.7	37	5.3
Mitotic grade				
Grade 0	3	100.0	0	0.0
Grade 1	3297	97.8	74	2.2
Grade 2	1616	95.8	71	4.2
Grade 3	695	92.2	59	7.8
Missing	1811	95.7	81	4.3
ER/PgR receptor status				
ER+/PgR+	4762	97.5	122	2.5
ER+/PgR–	1498	94.5	87	5.5
ER+/PgR unknown	1039	94.2	64	5.8
ER–/PgR+	123	91.1	12	8.9
HER-2 expression				
Normal	3865	97.5	101	2.5
Overexpressed	239	90.2	26	9.8
Missing	3318	95.5	158	4.5
Axillary node positivity				
0 positive	4411	98.2	81	1.8
1–3 positive	2157	96.4	81	3.6
≥4 positive	854	87.4	123	12.6
Vascular invasion				
No	5605	97.2	161	2.8
Yes	1247	92.7	98	7.3
Not assessable	419	96.1	17	3.9
Missing	151	94.4	9	5.6
Radiotherapy given				
No	2059	95.7	93	4.3
Yes	5355	96.5	192	3.5
Missing	8	100.0	0	0.0
Primary surgery				
Breast-conserving procedure	4303	98.1	84	1.9
Mastectomy	3114	93.9	201	6.1
Other	5	100.0	0	0.0
Chemotherapy use				
None	5564	96.7	192	3.3
Adjuvant only	1723	95.6	79	4.4
Neo-adjuvant with/without adjuvant	134	90.5	14	9.5
Missing	1	100.0	0	0.0

ER, estrogen receptor; PgR, progesterone receptor.

The difference in hazards appears to emerge around 1 year following randomization.

Figure 2 shows Cox model hazard ratios and confidence intervals (CIs) within subgroups of the significant prognostic factors. For all of the subgroups examined, with the exception of the grade 3 cohort, fewer early relapses were observed for the letrozole group compared with the tamoxifen group. The 95% CI for the hazard ratio of risk of early relapse for letrozole compared with tamoxifen did not cross the solid vertical line at 1.0 for patients with tumors that were bigger than 2 cm, grade 1 or 2, ER+ and PgR+/unknown, with four or more positive nodes, and with vascular invasion.

Within each subgroup in Figure 2, boxes located to the left of the dashed vertical line indicate that the observed effect of letrozole in that subgroup was greater than the effect of letrozole in the overall population. Though the observed effect of letrozole was greatest in patients with tumors that were grade 1, ER+/PgR unknown, or HER-2 over-expressing/amplified, these results were on the basis of little data (small boxes for hazard ratios and wide CIs). The data indicating a larger benefit from letrozole were statistically more robust for patients with four or more positive nodes, those with tumors >2 cm in diameter, or those with vascular invasion.

A comparison of the hazard ratios across the subgroup levels of each covariate (e.g. between tumors ≤2 cm and >2 cm) in Figure 2 shows that none of the prognostic factors is significantly predictive for the specific efficacy of letrozole. None of the interaction terms was statistically significant, as seen by the fact that, for each covariate, the CIs across levels of that covariate overlap. For example, the benefit of letrozole in patients with four or more positive nodes did not significantly differ from the benefit seen in patients with one to three or zero positive nodes.

Thus, the results of this multivariate analysis show that (i) letrozole significantly reduced the risk of early relapse compared with tamoxifen overall; (ii) within many but not all subgroups letrozole was significantly better than tamoxifen in preventing early relapse; and (iii) statistically there was no difference in the effect of letrozole across subgroup levels of any of the covariates examined, but letrozole was qualitatively more effective than tamoxifen within some subgroups (patients with four or more positive nodes, tumors > 2cm, or with vascular invasion).

discussion

Though a number of trials have shown superiority of aromatase inhibitors compared with standard tamoxifen therapy or placebo, it remains unclear whether an aromatase inhibitor should be given in sequence with tamoxifen or in place of it. Use of mathematical models with data from the aforementioned aromatase inhibitor trials led Cuzick et al. [6] to assert that early treatment with an aromatase inhibitor is superior to sequencing after 2 years of tamoxifen. Punglia et al. [7] reached the opposite conclusion when applying simulations on the basis of data from the aforementioned trials, namely that sequential therapy is preferable to an aromatase inhibitor alone.

Treatment choices on the basis of prognostic factors of relapse, without focusing on early relapses, have been previously studied. Among patients with small tumors without axillary

Table 3. Final multivariate Cox model results

Variable	Comparison	Hazard ratio	95% CI lower limit	95% CI upper limit	P value
Treatment	Letrozole versus tamoxifen	0.69	0.5	0.9	0.002
Tumor size	>2 versus ≤2 cm	1.54	1.2	2.0	0.001
Tumor grade	Grade 3 versus 1	2.43	1.6	3.6	<0.001
	Grade 2 versus 1	1.55	1.1	2.3	0.02
	Grade 3 versus 2	1.57	1.2	2.1	0.002
ER/PgR status	Grade missing versus 1	1.96	1.2	3.1	0.005
	ER+/PgR- versus ER+/PgR+	2.04	1.5	2.7	<0.001
	ER+/PgR unknown versus ER+/PgR+	1.59	1.1	2.2	0.005
ER-/PgR status	ER+/PgR- versus ER+/PgR unknown	1.28	0.9	1.8	0.16
	ER-/PgR+ versus ER+/PgR+	3.10	1.7	5.6	<0.001
	ER-/PgR+ versus ER+/PgR-	1.52	0.8	2.8	0.17
	ER-/PgR+ versus ER+/PgR unknown	1.95	1.0	3.7	0.04
HER-2	Overexpressed versus normal	2.48	1.6	3.8	<0.001
	Missing versus normal	0.79	0.5	1.2	0.29
Node positivity	≥4 versus 0 positive	4.81	3.5	6.6	<0.001
	1-3 versus 0 positive	1.73	1.3	2.4	<0.001
	≥4 versus 1-3 positive	2.79	2.1	3.7	<0.001
Vascular invasion	Yes versus no	1.39	1.1	1.8	0.02
	Not assessable versus no	1.26	0.8	1.9	0.29

CI, confidence interval; ER, estrogen receptor; PgR, progesterone receptor.

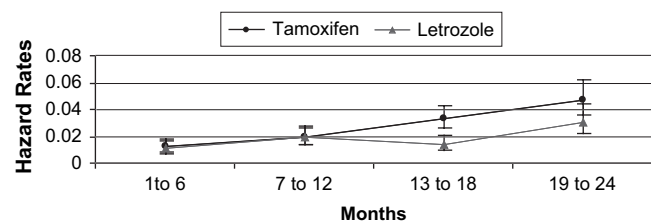


Figure 1. Semiannualized hazards of early relapse by treatment. Tamoxifen is represented in black by circles; letrozole is represented by gray triangles.

nodal involvement, and who did not receive adjuvant systemic therapy, high grade and lymphovascular invasion are commonly considered prognostic factors for recurrence at 10 years of follow-up [8]. Data are somewhat conflicting regarding the prognostic value of steroid hormone receptor status. According to a retrospective study by Bardou et al. [9] in the absence of adjuvant tamoxifen, PgR negativity is not a poor prognostic factor. In patients treated with tamoxifen, ER+/PgR- tumors displayed more aggressive features compared with ER+/PgR+ tumors [9, 10]. However, in a retrospective study from two randomized trials of adjuvant tamoxifen versus no other treatment, Dowsett et al. [11] found that antiestrogen improves relapse-free survival in case of ER+ tumors, regardless of PgR status. Nevertheless, these results would be better analyzed taking into account expression level of PgR [12].

In patients treated with anastrozole in the ATAC trial, Dowsett et al. [13] found that those with ER+/PgR- tumors had the same prognosis as those with ER+/PgR+ tumors, and that anastrozole was more effective than tamoxifen in both groups. Analyses of early relapses are infrequently carried out, but can be used to inform treatment choices, particularly for high-risk patients. Our analysis showed that highest risk for early relapse is linked to tumor burden (tumor size, nodal involvement) and

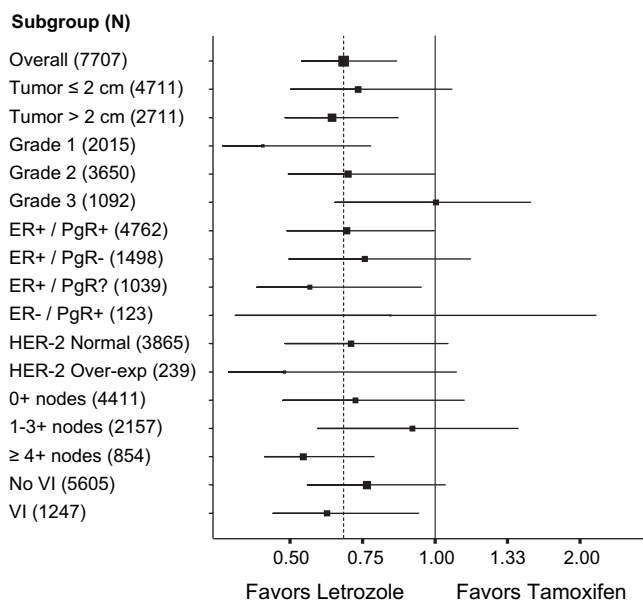


Figure 2. Cox model results for subgroup analyses of time to early relapse. Results were adjusted by all covariates present in the final multivariate model. Boxes represent hazard ratios (letrozole : tamoxifen) and lines represent 95% confidence intervals. Values <1.0 favor letrozole. The size of the boxes is inversely proportional to the standard error of the hazard ratio. The dashed vertical line at 0.69 gives the overall hazard ratio estimate for endocrine treatment in the final multivariate Cox model.

tumor aggressiveness (high grade, partial endocrine insensitivity, HER-2neu overexpression, vascular invasion). These findings are supported by three recent retrospective analyses carried out on patients treated with tamoxifen [14–16] or toremifene [16]. These studies identified grade 3 [14, 15],

lymph node involvement [14, 15], and low-positive ER status [14] as independent significant predictors of early relapse. Lymphovascular invasion, which was recognized as a poor prognostic factor in the St Gallen consensus conference [17], is an independent predictor of metastasis, particularly for patients with no nodal involvement [18, 19].

Even after controlling for predictors of high risk, we found that letrozole significantly reduced the risk of early relapse compared with tamoxifen. Despite the lack of significant interaction between endocrine treatment and the prognostic factors of early relapse, multivariate analyses indicated that the beneficial effect of letrozole versus tamoxifen may be qualitatively greater for patients with poor prognosis (four or more positive nodes, tumors >2 cm, or with vascular invasion) than for patients without poor prognosis (i.e. those with intermediate risk). For patients with intermediate risk of early relapse (less than four positive nodes, tumors ≤2 cm, and without vascular invasion), tamoxifen may be as effective as letrozole, and therefore sequential therapy may represent a good option, with toxicity profiles playing a greater role in therapy choice. Definitive evidence to support or refute this conjecture must await the results of ongoing randomized trials.

Curiously, letrozole appeared to be more effective than tamoxifen in patients with grade 1 tumors, though the number of recurrences in both treatment groups was low and almost 10% of patients did not have tumor grade available for analysis. Similarly, although HER-2 status was significant in the model, almost half of the patients did not have HER-2 measured and thus results and conclusions may change if all patients were assessed. Analysis of HER-2 as a predictive factor is important, considering that PgR expression and the HER-2 signaling pathway are linked [20, 21], and that among patients treated with adjuvant tamoxifen, ER+/PgR– tumors more frequently express HER-1 and HER-2, which are associated with poorer prognosis [10]. A similar analysis of early relapse would be useful once data from the BIG 1-98 second primary analysis on the role of switching become available.

In conclusion, letrozole resulted in a significant reduction in early relapse in BIG 1-98, even after adjusting for significant prognostic factors, which included node positivity, absence of both receptors being positive, high grade, HER-2 overexpression/amplification, large tumor size, and vascular invasion. Subgroup analyses of this large controlled randomized trial indicate that patients with high risk for early relapse may benefit most from upfront letrozole, while sequential therapy might be reserved for patients with intermediate risk, in whom tamoxifen did not differ significantly from letrozole. The second primary analysis of BIG 1-98, scheduled for 2008, will shed more light on this key question and will also address which sequence of tamoxifen and letrozole is best.

appendix

BIG 1-98 Collaborative Group Participants

Steering Committee: B. Thürlimann (Chair), L. Blacher, M. Castiglione, A. S. Coates, T. Cufer, J. F. Forbes, R. D. Gelber, A. Goldhirsch, A. Hiltbrunner, S. B. Holmberg, A. Keshaviah, R. Maibach, A. Martoni, L. Mauriac, H. T. Mouridsen,

K. N. Price, M. Rabaglio, A. Santoro, I. E. Smith, C. Straehle, G. Viale.

Novartis: H. A. Chaudri-Ross, A. Covelli, D. B. Evans, W. Hackl, E. Raman, M.G. Porro.

International Breast Cancer Study Group (IBCSG) Scientific Committee: A. Goldhirsch, A. S. Coates (Co-Chairs), L. Blacher, M. Castiglione, J. F. Forbes, R. D. Gelber, B. A. Gusterson, A. Hiltbrunner, C. Hürny, E. Murray, K. N. Price, M. Rabaglio, R. Studer, G. Viale, A. Wallgren.

IBCSG Foundation Council: B. Thürlimann (President), M. Castiglione, A. S. Coates, J. P. Collins, H. Cortés Funes, R. D. Gelber, A. Goldhirsch, M. Green, A. Hiltbrunner, S. B. Holmberg, D. K. Hossfeld, I. Láng, J. Lindtner, F. Paganetti, C.-M. Rudenstam, R. Stahel, H.-J. Senn, A. Veronesi.

Coordinating Center (Berne, Switzerland): M. Castiglione (CEO), A. Hiltbrunner (Director), M. Rabaglio, G. Egli, B. Cliffe, S. Ribeli-Hofmann, F. Munarini, R. Kammler, R. Studer, B. Ruepp, R. Maibach, N. Munarini.

Statistical Center (Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Boston, MA, USA): R. D. Gelber (Group Statistician), K. N. Price (Director of Scientific Administration), A. Keshaviah (Trial Statistician), H. Litman, H. Huang, L. J. Somos, B. Timmers, L. Nickerson.

Data Management Center (Frontier Science and Technology Research Foundation, Amherst, NY, USA): L. Blacher (Director of Data Management), T. H. Scolese (Coordinating Data Manager), M. Belisle, M. Caporale, J. Celano, L. Dalfonso, L. Dooley, S. Fischer, K. Gallaway, J. Gould, R. Hinkle, M. Holody, G. Jones, R. Krall, S. Lippert, J. Meshulam, L. Mundy, A. Pavlov-Shapiro, K. Scott, M. Scott, S. Shepard, J. Swick, L. Uhteg, D. Weinbaum, C. Westby, T. Zielinski.

Central Pathology Review Office (University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK): B. A. Gusterson, E. Mallon; (European Institute of Oncology, Division of Pathology, Milano, Italy): G. Viale, P. Dell'Orto, M. Mastropasqua, B. Del Curto.

Data and Safety Monitoring Committee: D.F. Hayes, J.E. Garber, S.W. Lagakos, I. Lindgren.

Study Support (Novartis Corp. Basel, Switzerland): E. Waldie, I. van Hoomissen, M. De Smet, W. Schmidt, A. Bolton, W. Hackl.

Breast International Group

International Breast Cancer Study Group. Australian New Zealand Breast Cancer Trials Group (ANZ BCTG): Board Chair: R. D. Snyder, Group Coordinator: J. F. Forbes, Chair Scientific Advisory Committee: A. S. Coates; ANZ BCTG Operations Office (Newcastle, Australia): D. Lindsay (Head Data Management), D. Preece (Senior Study Coordinator), J. Cowell, D. Talbot, A. Whipp.

Australia: The Cancer Council Victoria, Melbourne, VIC: F. Abell, R. Basser, R. Bell, B. Brady, D. Blakey, P. Briggs, I. Burns, P. Campbell, M. Chao, J. Chirgwin, B. Chua, K. Clarke, J. Collins, R. De Boer, J. C. Din, R. Doig, A. Dowling, R. Drummond, N. Efe, S. T. Fan, M. Francis, P. Francis, V. Ganju, P. Gibbs, G. Goss, M. Green, P. Gregory, J. Griffiths, I. Haines, M. Henderson, R. Holmes, P. James, J. Kiffler, M. Lehman, M. Leyden, L. Lim, G. Lindeman, R. Lynch, B. Mann, J. McKendrick, S. McLachlan, R. McLennan, G. Mitchell, S. Mitra, C. Murphy, I. Parker, K. Phillips, I. Porter,

- G. Richardson, J. Scarlet, S. Sewak, J. Shapiro, R. Snyder, R. Stanley, C. Steer, D. Stoney, A. Strickland, G. Toner, C. Underhill, K. White, M. White, A. Wirth, S. Wong; W P Holman Clinic, Launceston General Hospital, Launceston, Tasmania; D. Byram, I. Byard; Liverpool Hospital, Sydney, NSW: S. Della-Fiorentina, A. Goldrick, E. Hovey, E. Moylan, E. Segelov; Mount Hospital, Perth, WA: A. Chan, M. Buck, D. Hastrich, D. Ingram, G. Van Hazel, P. Willsher; Nepean Cancer Care Centre, Sydney, NSW: N. Wilcken, C. Crombie; Newcastle Mater Hospital, Newcastle, NSW: J. F. Forbes, F. Abell, S. Ackland, A. Bonaventura, S. Cox, J. Denham, R. Gourlay, D. Jackson, R. Sillar, J. Stewart; Prince of Wales Hospital, Sydney, NSW: C. Lewis, B. Brigham, D. Goldstein, M. Friedlander; Princess Alexandra Hospital, Woollongabba, QLD: E. Walpole, D. Thompson; Royal Adelaide Hospital, Adelaide, SA: P. G. Gill, M. Bochner, J. Coventry, J. Kollias, P. Malycha, I. Olver; Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital, Brisbane, QLD: M. Colosimo, R. Cheuk, L. Kenny, N. McCarthy, D. Wyld; Royal Hobart Hospital, Hobart, Tasmania: R. Young, R. Harrup, R. Kimber, R. Lowenthal; Royal Perth Hospital, Perth, WA: J. Trotter, E. Bayliss, A. Chan, D. Ransom; Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, Perth, WA: M. Byrne, M. Buck, J. Dewar, A. Nowak, A. Powell, G. Van Hazel; Toowoomba Hospital, Toowoomba, QLD: E. A. Abdi, R. Brodribb, Z. Volobueva; Westmead Hospital, Sydney, NSW: P. Harnett, V. Ahern, H. Gurney, N. Wilcken.
- New Zealand: Auckland Hospital, Auckland: V. J. Harvey, B. Evans, W. Jones, M. McCrystal, D. Porter, P. Thompson, M. Vaughan; Christchurch Hospital, Christchurch: D. Gibbs, C. Atkinson, R. Burcombe, B. Fitzharris, B. Hickey, M. Jeffery, B. Robinson; Dunedin Hospital, Dunedin: B. McLaren, S. Costello, J. North, D. Perez; Waikato Hospital, Hamilton: I. D. Campbell, L. Gilbert, R. Gannaway, M. Jameson, I. Kennedy, J. Long, G. Round, L. Spellman, D. Whittle, D. Woolerton.
- Brazil: Hospital de Clinicas de Porto Alegre, Porto Alegre: C. Menke, J. Biazús, R. Cericatto, J. Cavalheiro, N. Xavier, A. Bittelbrunn, E. Rabin.
- Chile: Chilean Cooperative Group for Oncologic Research, GOCCHI: J. Gutiérrez (Chairman), R. Arriagada (Scientific Adviser), L. Bronfman (Principal Investigator), M. Zuñiga (Data Manager); Clinica Las Condes, Santiago: J. Gutiérrez, J. C. Acevedo, S. Torres, A. León, E. Salazar; Hospital DIPRECA, Las Condes, Santiago: L. Soto Diaz, R. Duval, N. Oddeshede, M. C. Venti; Hospital San Juan de Dios, Santiago: K. Peña, L. Puente, V. Maidana; IRAM/Instituto de Radiomedicina, Vitacura, Santiago: R. Baeza, R. Arriagada, P. Olfos, J. Solé, E. Vinés, C. Mariani.
- Hungary: National Institute of Oncology, Budapest: I. Láng, E. Hitre, E. Szabó, Z. Horváth, E. Ganofszy, E. Juhos.
- Italy: Centro di Riferimento Oncologico, Aviano: A. Veronesi, D. Crivellari, M. D. Magri, A. Buonadonna, F. Coran, E. Borsatti, E. Candiani, S. Massarut, M. Roncadin, M. Arcicasa, A. Carbone, T. Perin, A. Gloghini; Ospedali Riuniti di Bergamo, Bergamo: C. Tondini, R. Labianca, P. Poletti, A. Bettini; Ospedale degli Infermi, Biella: M. Clerico, M. Vincenti, A. Malossi, E. Seles, E. Perfetti, B. Sartorello; Spedali Civili, Brescia: E. Simoncini, G. Marini, P. Marpicati, R. Farfaglia, A. M. Bianchi, P. Grigolato, L. Lucini, P. Frata, A. Huscher, E. Micheletti, C. Fogazzi; U. O. Medicina Oncologica, Ospedale Capri, Ospedale Mirandola: F. Artioli, K. Cagossi, L. Scaltriti, E. Bandieri, L. Botticelli, G. Giovanardi; Ospedale di Cattolica 'Cervesi', Cattolica: A. Ravaioli, E. Pasquini, B. Rudnas; Ospedale Civile, Gorizia: L. Foghin; Ospedale 'A. Manzoni' Lecco, Lecco: M. Visini, L. Zavallone, G. Ucci; Istituto Europeo di Oncologia, Milano: M. Colleoni, G. Viale, P. Veronesi, G. Peruzzotti, L. Corsetto, R. Ghisini, G. Renne, A. Luini, L. Orlando, R. Torrisi, A. Rocca, T. De Pas, E. Munzone, V. Galimberti, S. Zurrida, M. Intra, F. Nolé, R. Orecchia, G. Martinelli, F. de Braud, A. Goldhirsch; Ospedale Infermi, Rimini: A. Ravaioli, L. Gianni.
- Peru: Instituto de Enfermedades Neoplásicas, Lima: H. Gome.
- Slovenia: Institute of Oncology, Ljubljana: T. Cufer, B. Pajk, J. Cervek.
- South Africa: Groote Schuur Hospital and University of Cape Town, Cape Town: I. D. Werner, E. Murray, D. Govender, S. Dalvie, T. Erasmus, B. Robertson, B. Read, E. Nel, J. Toop, N. Nedeva, E. Panieri; Sandton Oncology Centre, Johannesburg: D. Vorobiof, M. Chasen, G. McMichael, C. Mohammed. Local funding provided by the Cancer Association of South Africa.
- Sweden: West Swedish Breast Cancer Study Group: S. B. Holmberg; Sahlgrenska U Hospital, Moelndal: S. B. Holmberg, J. Mattsson; Boras Hospital, Boras; Karlstads Hospital, Karlstads: H. Sellström; Kungälv Hospital, Kungälv: B. Lindberg.
- Switzerland: Swiss Group for Clinical Cancer Research: A. Goldhirsch (up to January 2004), R. Herrmann (from June 2004); Kantonsspital Aarau, Zentrum f. Onkologie, Aarau: A. Schönenberger, W. Mingrone, Ch. Honegger, E. Bärtschi, M. Neter, M. Rederer, G. Schär; University Hospital Basel, Basel: C. Rochlitz, R. Herrmann, D. Oertli, E. Wight, H. Moch; Institute of Oncology of Southern Switzerland: Ospedale San Giovanni, Bellinzona: J. Bernier, L. Bronz, F. Cavalli, E. Gallerani, A. Richetti, A. Franzetti; Ospedale Regionale di Lugano (Civico & Italiano), Lugano: M. Conti-Beltraminelli, M. Ghielmini, T. Gyr, S. Mauri, P. C. Saletti; Ospedale Regionale Beata Vergine, Mendrisio: A. Goldhirsch, O. Pagani, R. Graffeo, M. Locatelli, S. Longhi, P.C. Rey, M. Ruggeri; Ospedale Regionale La Carità, Locarno: E. Zucca, D. Wyss; Istituto Cantonale di Patologia, Locarno: L. Mazzucchelli, E. Pedrinis, T. Rusca; Inselspital, Berne: S. Aebi, M. F. Fey, M. Castiglione, M. Rabaglio; Kantonsspital Olten, Olten: S. Aebi, M. F. Fey, M. Zuber, G. Beck; Bürgerspital, Solothurn: S. Aebi, M. F. Fey, R. Schönenberger; Spital Thun-Simmental AG Thun: J.M. Lüthi, D. Rauch; Hôpital Cantonal Universitaire HCUG, Geneva: H. Bonnefoi; Rätisches Kantons- und Regionalspital, Chur: F. Egli, R. Steiner, P. Fehr; Centre Pluridisciplinaire d'Oncologie, Lausanne: L. Perey, P. de Grandi, W. Jeanneret, S. Leyvraz, J.-F. Delaloye; Kantonsspital St Gallen, St Gallen: B. Thürlimann, D. Köberle, F. Weisser, S., Mattmann, A. Müller, T. Cerny, B. Späti, M. Höfliger, G. Fürstenberger, B. Bolliger, C. Öhlschlegel, U. Lorenz, M. Bamert, J. Kehl-Blank, E. Vogel; Kantonales Spital Herisau, Herisau: B. Thürlimann, D. Hess, I. Senn, D. Köberle, A. Ehram, C. Nauer, C. Öhlschlegel, J. Kehl-Blank, E. Vogel; Stadtspital Triemli, Zürich: L. Widmer, M. Häfner; Universitätsspital Zürich, Zürich: B. C. Pestalozzi, M. Fehr, R. Caduff, Z. Varga, R. Trüb, D. Fink.
- Swiss Private MDs: Private Praxis, Zürich: B. A. Bättig; Sonnenhof-Klinik Engeried, Berne: K. Buser; Frauenklinik Limmattalspital, Schlieren: N. Bürki; Private Praxis,

Birsfelden: A. Dieterle; Private Praxis, Biel: L. Hasler; Private Praxis, Baar: M. Mannhart-Harms; Brust-Zentrum, Zürich: C. Rageth; Private Praxis, Berne: J. Richner; Private Praxis, Bellinzona: V. Spataro; Private Praxis, Winterthur: M. Umbricht.

UK: King's College Hospital/Breast Unit, London: P. Ellis, S. Harris, N. Akbar, H. McVickers, C. Lees, R. Raman, G. Crane.

Danish Group Danish Breast Cancer Cooperative Group (DBCG). H. T. Mouridsen; Rigshospitalet, Copenhagen: H. T. Mouridsen; Vejle Hospital, Vejle: E. Jakobsen; Odense University Hospital, Odense: S. Cold; KAS Herlev/Herlev University Hospital, Herlev: C. Kamby; Aalborg Sygehus Syd, Aalborg: M. Ewertz; Hilleroed Hospital, Hilleroed: P.M. Vestlev; Aarhus University Hospital, Aarhus: J. Andersen; Roskilde County Hospital, Roskilde: P. Grundtvig; Esbjerg Central Hospital, Esbjerg: E. Sandberg; Naestved Central Hospital, Naestved: P. Philip; Soenderborg Sygehus, Soenderborg: E. L. Madsen; Herning Central Hospital, Herning: K. A. Moeller; Viborg Sygehus, Viborg: V. Haahr; Landspítali University Hospital, Reykjavik, Iceland: J. Johansson.

French Group Fédération Nationale des Centres de Lutte Contre le Cancer (FNCLCC). Institut Bergonié, Bordeaux: L. Mauriac, M. Debled, P. Campo; Centre Hospitalier de la Côte Basque, Bayonne: D. Larregain-Fournier, S. Remy; Centre Jean Perrin, Clermont-Ferrand: H. Auvray; Centre Georges François Leclerc, Dijon: C. De Gislain, F. Delille, M.-C. Porteret; Centre Oscar Lambret, Lille: V. Servent, M. Chapoutier; CHRU, Limoges: N. Tubiana-Mathieu, S. Lavau-Denes, P. Bosc; Centre Léon Bérard, Lyon: J. P. Guastalla, Th. Bachelot, C. Arbault; Centre Hospitalier Meaux, Meaux: G. Netter-Pinon; C.H.G. André Boulloche, Montbéliard: V. Perrin, A. Monnier, Y. Hammoud; Centre Paul Lamarque, Montpellier: G. Romieu, L. Culine, V. Pinosa; Clinique Francheville, Périgueux: L. Cany, C. Maguire; Hôpital de la Milétrie, Poitiers: A. Daban, M. Le Saux, C. Grandon; Centre Eugène Marquis, Rennes: P. Kerbrat, C. Catheline; Centre Henri Becquerel, Rouen: C. Veyret, E. Jugieau, V. Talon; Centre René Gauducheau, Saint-Herblain: A. Le Mevel, S. Maury; Centre Claudius Régaud, Toulouse: L. Gladieff, N. Lignon.

North Yorkshire Group. Harrogate District Hospital, Harrogate, North Yorkshire: D. Dodwell; Huddersfield Royal Infirmary, Huddersfield: J. Joffe; Castlehill Hospital, Hull: P. Drew; Airedale General Hospital, Keighley, W. Yorkshire: A. Nejm; Leeds General Infirmary, Leeds: D. Dodwell, K. Horgan; St James's University Hospital, Leeds: M. Lansdown, T. Perren; Weston Park Hospital, Sheffield: R. E. Coleman.

Independent Centers/Groups

Argentina: Centro Oncológico Confidence, Buenos Aires: D. Campos; Hospital Alemán, Buenos Aires: F. Cópola; Hospital Británico, Buenos Aires: J. Martinez; Hospital Evita, Buenos Aires: M. Freue; Hospital Posadas, Buenos Aires: C. Wainstein; Hospital Zubizarreta, Buenos Aires: A. Z. Comba; Instituto Dr Estevez, Buenos Aires: E. Cazap; Instituto Oncológico Dr Angel H. Roffo, Buenos Aires: E. Mickiewicz; Sanatorio Municipal Julio A. Mendez, Buenos Aires: L. Balbiani; Centro Privado de Ginecología, Córdoba: A. Osuna; Hospital Privado de Córdoba,

Córdoba: E. Palazzo; Instituto Modelo de Ginecología y Obstetricia, Córdoba: M. de Romedis; Fundación Mainetti-Centro Oncológico de Excelencia, La Plata: S. Cagnolati; Hospital Privado de la Comunidad, Mar del Plata: C. A. Delfino, G. Caccia; Escuela de Medicina Nuclear, Mendoza: R. L. de Angelis; Centro Oncológico de Rosario, Rosario: L. Fein, R. Sala; Hospital Provincial de Rosario, Rosario: C. Nassurdi, A. Colombo Berra; Clínica Especializada ISIS, Santa Fe: R. Viroglio, C. Blajman; Hospital Regional de Concepción, Tucumán: H. Requejo; Instituto de Maternidad y Ginecología Nuestra Señoras de las Mercedes, Tucumán: L. Silberman.

Australia: Flinders Medical Centre, Adelaide, SA: S. Birrell, M. Eaton, C. Hoffman; Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Adelaide, SA: V. Humeniuk; The Canberra Hospital, Canberra, ACT: P. Craft, R. Stuart-Harris, D. Yip; The Geelong Hospital, Geelong, VIC: R. Bell, F. Abell, M. Francis, J. Kiffer, R. Lynch, R. McLennan, K. White; Royal Melbourne Hospital, Melbourne, VIC: M. Green, R. Basser, J. Collins, R. De Boer, J. C. Din, N. Efe, S. T. Fan, G. Lindeman, S. Wong; Western General Hospital, Melbourne, VIC: M. Green, R. Basser, J. Collins, R. De Boer, J. C. Din, N. Efe, S. T. Fan, G. Lindeman, S. Wong; Newcastle Mater Hospital, Newcastle, NSW: J. Stewart, F. Abell, S. Ackland, A. Bonaventura; Royal Perth Hospital, Perth, WA: J. Trotter, E. Bayliss, A. Chan, D. Ransom, A. Redfern; St George Hospital, Sydney, NSW: P. de Souza, M. Links; St Vincent's Hospital, Sydney, NSW: D. Dalley, J. Grygiel, R. Ward; Murray Valley Private Hospital, Wodonga, VIC: C. Underhill, K. Clarke, C. Steer; Princess Alexandra Hospital, Woolloongabba, QLD: E. Walpole, D. Thompson.

Belgium: Institut Jules Bordet, Bruxelles: J. M. Nogaret; University Hospitals Leuven, Leuven: M. R. Christiaens, P. Neven, R. Paridaens, A. Smeets, I. Vergote, C. Weltens, H. Wildiers; Les Cliniques Saint-Joseph ASBL, Liège: C. Focan; Clinique du Parc Léopold, Bruxelles: L. Marcelis; C. H. Etterbeek-Ixelles, Bruxelles: J. P. Kains; Service d'Oncologie Clinique Notre-Dame, Charleroi: J.-L. Canon; C. H. U. André Vèsale, Montigny-Le Tilleul: D. Brohèe.

Canada: Cambridge Memorial Hospital, Cambridge: J. Gowing; CHUM, Campus Notre-Dame, Montreal: L. Yelle; Hôpital Maisonneuve-Rosemont, Montreal: P. Dubé.

Chile: Fundacion Lopez Perez, Santiago: C. Vogel; Hospital Carlos Van Buren, Valparaiso: M. León Prieto.

Czech Republic: Institute of Oncology, Brno: K. Petrakova, M. Palacova, R. Demlova; Department of Clinical and Radiation Oncology, Ceske Budejovice: H. Siffnerova, J. Fischer, I. Bustova; Centre of Breast Diseases, Prague: H. Kankova, M. Pintova; Institute of Radiation Oncology, Prague: P. Vitek; University Hospital, Prague: J. Abrahamova, D. Kordikova; University Hospital, Prague: L. Petruzalka, E. Sedlackova, H. Honova.

Germany: Onkologische Gemeinschaftspraxis, Augsburg: B. Heinrich; Zentralklinikum/Frauenklinik, Augsburg: A. Wischnik; Universitätsklinikum Essen, Essen: C. Oberhoff, A. E. Schindler; Universitäts-Frauenklinik d. JLU Giessen, Giessen: K. Münstedt; Onkologische Gemeinschaftspraxis, Göttingen: D. Meyer; Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, Halle: R. Grosse, H. Kölbl; Universitätskliniken des Saarlandes, Homburg: W. Schmidt, D. Mink; Universitäts-Frauenklinik und Poliklinik Universitätskrankenhaus Eppendorf, Hamburg: F.

Jänicke; Kliniken d. Med. Hochschule, Frauenklinik, Hannover: H. J. Lück; Krankenhaus Mutterhaus der Borromäerinnen, Trier: W. Dornoff; Gynäkologische Abteilung des St Josefhospital, Wiesbaden: G. Hoffmann; Gynäkologische Abteilung d. Marienhospitals, Universität Witten-Herdecke, Witten: J. Hackmann, W. Bader.

Hungary: SZOTE Onkoterápiás Klinika, Szeged: Z. Kahan; BM Központi Kórház, Budapest: G. Pajkos, K. Kristo; SOTE Radiológiai és Onkoterápiás Klinika, Budapest: M. Dank; Uzsoki Utcai Kórház, Budapest: T. Nagykalnai, L. Landherr; Almási Balogh Pál Kórház, Ózd: E. Kner; Területi Kórház Onkologia, Szentes: M. Kispál; Szent Borbála Kórház, Megyei Onkológiai Gondozó, Tatabánya: Á. Dani.

Italy: Policlinico S. Orsola-Malpighi, Bologna: A. Martoni, C. Zamagni, S. Giaquinta, E. Piana; Ospedale S. Croce, Fano: R. Mattioli, L. Imperatori; Istituto Clinica Humanitas, Milan/Rozzano: A. Santoro, C. Carnaghi, L. Rimassa; Azienda Ospedaliera San Filippo Neri, Rome: G. Gasparini, G. Sciarretta, A. Morabito; Az. Ospedaliera Treviglio-Caravaggio, Treviglio: S. Barni, M. Cazzaniga, M. Cabiddu; Policlinico Universitario, Udine: F. Puglisi; Ospedale di Torrette, Ancona: R. Cellerino, S. Antognoli, F. Freddari; University of Cagliari, Policlinico Universitario, Cagliari: G. Mantovani, E. Massa, G. Astara; Ospedale Civile Feltre, Feltre: R. Segati; Istituto Nazionale Ricerca Cancro, Genova: R. Rosso, L. Del Mastro, M. Venturini, C. Bighin; Istituto Nazionale dei Tumori, Milano: E. Bajetta, N. Zilembo, D. Paleari, G. Procopio; Azienda Ospedaliera di Parma, Parma: S. Salvagni, M. A. Perrone, V. Franciosi; Azienda Ospedaliera 'S. Salvatore', Pesaro: G. Catalano, S. Luzi Fedeli; Azienda Ospedaliera 'Ospedale di Circolo e Fondazione Macchi' Varese: G. Pinotti, G. Giardina, I. Vallini; University of Cagliari, Policlinico Universitario, Cagliari: B. Massidda, M. T. Ionta, M. C. Deidda; Ospedale Maggiore, Lodi: G. Nalli, G. Sita; Policlinico Universitario, Palermo: I. Carreca, S. Cucciarri, D. Burgio; Ospedale Civile dello Spirito Santo, Pescara: M. Lombardo, G. Pandoli, P. Di Stefano; Azienda Ospedaliera Santa Maria Nuova, Reggio Emilia: C. Boni, G. Bisagni, M. C. Banzi, P. Linarello; Azienda Ospedaliera Desenzano del Garda, Manerbio: G. Colosini, A. Spasiano, A. Caldonazzo; Ospedale Civile ASL 20, Tortona: M. G. Pacquola.

Netherlands: Ziekenhuis Leyenburg, Den Haag: H. P. Sleebom; Catharina Ziekenhuis, Eindhoven: H. J. T. Rutten; St Anna Ziekenhuis, Geldrop: E. J. T. Luiten; Tweesteden Ziekenhuis, Tilburg: H. Th. J. Roerdink; Maxima Medisch Centrum, Veldhoven: R. H. M. Roumen.

New Zealand: Dunedin Hospital, Dunedin: B. McLaren, S. Costello, J. North, D. Perez, K. Bayston, M. Pfeiffer; Waikato Hospital, Hamilton: I. Kennedy, I. D. Campbell, L. Gilbert, R. Gannaway, M. Jameson, J. Long, G. Round, L. Spellman, D. Whittle, D. Woolerton.

Poland: Department of Oncology and Radiotherapy, Medical University of Gdansk, Gdansk: J. Jassem, M. Welnicka-Jaskiewicz, E. Senkus-Konefka, K. Matuszewska; Rydygier's Memorial Hospital, Krakow-Nova Huta: P. Koralewski, J. Pernal; Klinika Nowotworów Piersi i, Chirurgii Rekonstrukcyjnej-Warszawa, Warszawa: T. Pienkowski, E. Brewczynska, B. Bauer-Kosinska, R. Sienkiewicz-Kozłowska, A. Jagiello-Grusfeld, K. Sudol; Centrum Onkologii w Bydgoszczy, Oddział Onkologii Klinicznej, Bydgoszcz: J. Tujakowski, B.

Zurawski; Collegium Medicum Jagiellonian University, Krakow: J. Pawlega, E. Jablonska, A. Zygulska; Oddział Kliniczny Onkologiczny, Centralnego Szpitala Klinicznego Wojskowej, Akademii Medycznej-Warszawa, Warszawa: M. Górnasiowa; Dolnoslaskie Centrum Onkologii, Wrocław: E. Filypczyk-Cisarz, K. Pajak.

Portugal: Hospital de S. João, Porto: M. Damasceno; Instituto Português de Oncologia de Coimbra, Coimbra: J. Q. Albano; Hospital de Santa Maria, Lisboa: B. da Costa, L. Costa; Instituto Português de Oncologia de Lisboa, Lisboa: A. Henriques, H. Amaral; Hospital Geral de Santo António, Porto: F. Marques.

Russia: Cancer Research Centre, Moscow: D. V. Komov, S. B. Polikarpova; Moscow Municipal Hospital No. 62, Moscow: A. N. Makhson, N. V. Zabaznyi; Moscow Research Institute of Diagnostics and Surgery, Moscow: E. K. Vozny, N. Y. Dobrovolskaya, S. Bolshakova, O. V. Yurgina; N. M. Emmanuel Institute of Biochemical Physics, Moscow: D. B. Korman, I. A. Maslova; N.N. Petrov Research Institute of Oncology, St Petersburg: V. Semiglazov, V. Ivanov; Saint-Petersburg City Oncological Dispensary, St Petersburg: G. Manikhas, G. Dolmatov.

South Africa: Mamma Clinic, Tygerberg Hospital, Cape Town: J. Apffelstaedt; Southern Cross Hospital, Cape Town: D. Eedes; Pretoria Academic Hospital, Pretoria: C. Slabber; Pretoria East Hospital, Pretoria: M. A. Coccia-Portugal; Eastern Cape Oncology Centre, Port Elizabeth: K. Maart.

Spain: Hospital Ruber Internacional, Madrid: J. E. Alés Martínez, P. Aramburo, R. Sánchez; Hospital Son Dureta, Palma del Mallorca: J. Rifa, J. Martin; Centro Oncológico Integral de Madrid, Madrid: R. Pérez-Carrión, J. L. González Larriba, A. Cubillo; Hospital Universitario San Carlos, Madrid: M. M. Jiménez, A. Casado; Hospital Central de Asturias, Oviedo: J. Fra, J. M. Vieitez, E. Esteban, A. J. Lacave.

Switzerland: Universitätsfrauenklinik, Basel: E. Wight, S. Bartens, R. Decio, U. Güth; Klinik am Park, Zürich: U. Breitenstein.

Turkey: Ankara University Ibni Sina Hospital, Ankara: F. Icli, D. Dincol; Hacettepe University Oncology Institute, Ankara: E. Baltali, Y. Ozisik; Istanbul University Oncology Institute, Istanbul: E. Topuz, M. Basaran, A. Aydiner; Ege University Medical School, Izmir: E. Ozdedeli; 9 Eylul University Medical School, Izmir: O. Harmancioglu, A. U. Yilmaz.

UK: The Royal Marsden Hospital, London, Royal Marsden NHS Trust, Surrey: I. E. Smith; University of Dundee, Dundee: A. M. Thompson; Christie Hospital NHS Trust, South Manchester University Hospital Trust, Manchester: A. Wardley; Royal Bournemouth Hospital, Bournemouth: T. Hickish; North Middlesex Hospital, London: F. Neave.

Uruguay: Hospital de Clinicas Dr Manuel Quintela, Montevideo, Uruguay: G. Sabini.

acknowledgements

We thank the patients, physicians, nurses, and data managers who participated in this clinical trial; the Breast International Group; the study steering committee; and the International Breast Cancer Study Group (IBCSG) Data and Safety Monitoring Committee. The manuscript was prepared by the authors, who made final decisions on content, while the Steering

Committee (including employees of Novartis) reviewed the paper and offered changes. No medical writer or editor was involved in the preparation of this manuscript. We thank Novartis for funding and data monitoring; and the IBCSG for the design of the trial, coordination, data management, medical review, and statistical support. The IBCSG is partially funded by the Swedish Cancer Society, The Cancer Council Australia, Australian New Zealand Breast Cancer Trials Group, Frontier Science Technology and Research Foundation, the Swiss Group for Clinical Cancer Research, United States National Cancer Institute (CA-75362), and the Foundation for Clinical Cancer Research of Eastern Switzerland. Specific groups, centers, and individuals are listed in the Appendix. The trial was sponsored by a pharmaceutical company, Novartis. Novartis provided drug distribution and financial support and imposed no restrictions on the investigators with respect to trial data. The IBCSG Statistical Center (unblinded) and Data Management Center (blinded) had access to the database. After the release of the results by the Data and Safety Monitoring Committee, the unblinded database was transferred to Novartis for preparation of the Clinical Study Report for health authorities.

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