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Published in:
European Clinical Respiratory Journal

DOI:
10.1080/20018525.2020.1736934

Publication date:
2020

Document version
Final published version

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Citation for published version (APA):

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To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/20018525.2020.1736934

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Published online: 17 Mar 2020.

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Clinical characteristics of the BREATHE cohort – a real-life study on patients with asthma and COPD

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

\textbf{Background:} The BREATHE study is a cross-sectional study of real-life patients with asthma and/or COPD in Denmark and Sweden aiming to increase the knowledge across severities and combinations of obstructive airway disease.

\textbf{Design:} Patients with suspicion of asthma and/or COPD and healthy controls were invited to participate in the study and had a standard evaluation performed consisting of questionnaires, physical examination, FeNO and lung function, mannitol provocation test, allergy test, and collection of sputum and blood samples. A subgroup of patients and healthy controls had a bronchoscopy performed with a collection of airway samples.

\textbf{Results:} The study population consisted of 1403 patients with obstructive airway disease (859 with asthma, 271 with COPD, 126 with concurrent asthma and COPD, 147 with other), and 89 healthy controls (smokers and non-smokers). Of patients with asthma, 54% had moderate-to-severe disease and 46% had mild disease. In patients with COPD, 82% had groups A and B, whereas 18% had groups C and D classified disease. Patients with asthma more frequently had childhood asthma, atopic dermatitis, and allergic rhinitis, compared to patients with COPD, asthma + COPD and Other, whereas FeNO levels were higher in patients with asthma and asthma + COPD compared to COPD and Other (18 ppb and 16 ppb vs 12.5 ppb and 14 ppb, p < 0.001). Patients with asthma, asthma + COPD and Other had higher sputum eosinophilia (1.5%, 1.5%, 1.2% vs 0.75%, respectively, p < 0.001) but lower sputum neutrophilia (39.3, 43.5, 40.8% vs 66.8%, p < 0.001) compared to patients with COPD.

\textbf{Conclusions:} The BREATHE study provides a unique database and biobank with clinical information and samples from 1403 real-life patients with asthma, COPD, and overlap representing different severities of the diseases. This research platform is highly relevant for disease phenotype- and biomarker studies aiming to describe a broad spectrum of obstructive airway diseases.

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\textbf{Summary:} The BREATHE study provides a research platform with clinical data and biological samples from 1492 real-life patients with asthma, COPD, or both and healthy controls for development of novel biomarkers and diagnostic tools for obstructive airway disease.

\textbf{ARTICLE HISTORY}

Received 26 November 2019
Accepted 24 February 2020

\textbf{KEYWORDS} Asthma; COPD; airway hyperresponsiveness; inflammation; real-life population

\textbf{Introduction}

Randomized controlled trials (RCT) address important questions such as risk/benefit profiles of new therapies, but to improve internal validity they often report results from narrow patient groups representing less than 2% of the real-life patient population and thus hampers external validity [1,2]. Real-life studies include patients with ‘real-life’ co-morbidities, life-style factors, various inflammatory phenotypes, and different adherence profiles, and these patients may, therefore, elicit another response to treatment compared with the highly selected patient groups included in RCTs [3,4]. Therefore, real-life studies are pivotal to address issues concerning the entire patient population being exposed to the drugs investigated in RCTs [5,6].
Examples of large patient-cohort studies within the field of asthma are the U-BIOPRED and the SARP studies [7,8] that included large samples of patients with severe and mild to moderate asthma. The importance of these multisite studies is considerable, but the focus has primarily been towards increasing knowledge on severe asthma. However, the frequency of severe asthma in an asthma population is less than 10% [9,10], indicating that knowledge about the majority of asthma patients must be gained from other sources. The same goes for patients with COPD and COPD, who generally have been excluded from most asthma studies.

New treatment strategies are being developed these years along with an increasing demand for individualized disease management and new biomarkers to guide treatment and follow-up and to assess comorbidities [11,12]. Therefore, in-depth knowledge of real-life respiratory disease is required to develop a scientific, evidence-based understanding of the underlying disease mechanisms driving the diseases in the entire patient population.

With the BREATHE research platform, we aimed to develop a well-characterized and comprehensive database and biobank with clinical data and samples from real-life patients with different severities of obstructive airway disease as well as a reference population of healthy controls.

**Methods**

**Design**

The study was a multicentre, descriptive cross-sectional clinical study recruiting real-life patients with asthma and/or COPD and healthy controls from five clinical centres: two specialist care units in Eastern Denmark and one specialist care unit plus two primary care units in Southern Sweden. The recruitment period was 2 years (February 2017–February 2019). The study and all related study documents were approved by the local ethics committees (H-16047428, Denmark and Dnr 2016/1069, Lund Sweden). All participants gave written informed consent prior to the study (Helsinki declaration 1964–2014 50). The study was not registered in a public domain.

**Participants**

The participants were either newly referred patients with suspected asthma or COPD, or patients at regular review for asthma or COPD at either specialist care units or primary care clinics; or subjects recruited as healthy controls. All healthy controls were screened by an MD to ensure no present or former respiratory disease. All participants underwent a baseline visit (visit 1a+1b), and a subset of patients and healthy controls underwent a bronchoscopy (visit 2) (Figure S1). Inclusion and exclusion criteria are described in the supplementary methods section.

**Interview**

Information on respiratory disease, allergy, family history of atopic diseases, seasonal variation in lung and nasal symptoms, and medication for respiratory diseases and/or allergy was obtained. History of tobacco consumption was recorded, and patients were classified as never smoker, former smoker (smoke-free for at least the past 6 months), or current smoker; the average number of pack-years was calculated ((average number of daily cigarettes*years)/20).

**Physical examination**

All participants had a health check performed with a focus on respiratory illness and co-morbidities – including measurement of blood pressure, pulse, and oxygen saturation (Visit 1). Nasal inspection for polyps and swollen mucosa was performed followed by a nasal swab of the meatus medius/medial concha.

**Baseline measurements**

Age, sex, weight, and height were recorded for all participants. BMI was calculated as weight in kg/(height in meters)^2.

**Questionnaires**

All patients answered 12 questionnaires regarding symptoms and disease-control (ACQ-5 [13], ACT [14], CAT [15], Medical Research Council dyspnoea scale (mMRC)) [16], quality-of-life (SF12 [17], miniAQLQ [18], miniRQLQ [19], CCQ [20], HADS [21]), and comorbidities (Nijmegen [22], SNOT22 [23], Epworth Sleepiness Scale (ESS) [24]) (Table 3). Patients were also asked about hospital referrals and visits to GP or specialist due to exacerbations, the onset of disease and childhood symptoms as well as socio-economic factors such as income and education level. The presence of chronic rhinosinusitis (CRS) was deduced from answers to the SNOT22 questionnaires as described [25] using a cut-off ≥3 and based on the nasal inspection patients with CRS were classified with (w) or without (s) nasal polyps (NP), i.e. CRSwNP or CRSsNP.

**Pre-medication**

Prior to respiratory testing, participants were asked not to use short-acting β2 agonist (SABA) for 8 h, inhaled
corticosteroid (ICS) for 12 h, long-acting β2 agonists (LABAs), long-acting muscarinic antagonists (LAMA), short-acting muscarinic antagonists (SAMA), theophylline or smoking for 24 h, leukotriene-antagonist for 1 day and antihistamines for 72 h before the visit. Patients on a stable dose of oral corticosteroids (OCS) could continue their use.

**Exhaled nitric oxide**

Fractional exhaled nitric oxide (FeNO) was analysed using NIOX VERO® equipment (Aerocrine AB, Solna, Sweden) and the mean of three measurements was recorded [26]. In approximately one-third of the participants, alveolar NO and bronchial flow were measured using Medisoft FENO+ (Sorinnes, Belgium).

**Spirometry**

Spirometry was performed according to the standards specified by the ERS and ATS [27]. Briefly, FEV1 and FVC were measured three times, with differences between the two largest FEV1 values being ≤0.150 L and the two largest FVC values being ≤0.150 L, using a Jaeger spirometer with ECCS 93 reference values (Intramedic®, Gentofte, Denmark).

**Static lung volume**

Participants recruited from the specialist care units had measurements of total lung capacity (TLC) and diffusion capacity for carbon monoxide (DLCO) performed using Jaeger® box (Intramedic®, Gentofte, Denmark) according to the standards specified by the ERS and ATS [28]. Predicted normal values of FEV1, FVC, FEV1/FVC ratio based on sex, height, weight, and age were calculated using reference values ECCS 93 [29].

**Reversibility test**

Patients with an FEV1 <70% predicted performed a short-acting β2 reversibility test. FEV1 was measured at baseline and 15 min after 0.8 mg of salbutamol (4 × 0.2 mg or 8 × 0.1 mg). The test was considered positive if FEV1 increased with at least 12% (and 200 ml) from baseline [30].

**Mannitol bronchial provocation**

A mannitol test was performed in participants with an FEV1 ≥70% of predicted (Aridol™; Pharmaxis, Frenchs Forest, Australia). A positive test response indicating airway hyperresponsiveness (AHR) was defined as a 15% fall or more in FEV1 at a total dose of ≤635 mg. Sensitivity to mannitol was reported as PD15, i.e. the mannitol dose that results in a 15% fall or more in FEV1, and responsiveness was reported as a response–dose ratio (RDR) defined as percent fall in FEV1/ cumulative dose of mannitol [31].

**Allergy testing and atopy**

Specific IgEs or skin prick test (ALK-Abello*, Hørsholm) was performed with a standard panel of 10 aeroallergens. The specific IgE test was considered positive if at least one of the specific IgE levels >0.35 kU/L and the skin prick test was considered positive if at least one wheal was >3 mm observed after 15 min. Atopy was defined as a positive-specific IgE or skin prick test.

**Disease severity and diagnosis**

Severity of asthma was classified according to GINA guidelines [30,32] and COPD was classified according to GOLD guidelines [33]. A diagnosis of asthma, COPD, or concurrent asthma and COPD (termed ‘asthma + COPD’ hereafter) was based on thorough medical history, clinical evaluation, and relevant lung function and bronchoprovocation tests. Patients in whom a diagnosis of asthma or COPD could not be made were allocated to the ‘Other’ group.

**Biological samples**

Blood samples and nasal swabs (ESWAB 482C, Copan, Italy) were obtained from all participants. Leukocyte and differential cell counts were performed and blood eosinophils >0.3 × 10^9 cells/L was used as a cut-off to determine the presence of eosinophilic inflammation in the blood [34]. For the subset of participants undergoing bronchoscopy, bronchoalveolar lavage (BAL)-fluid, brushings and mucosa biopsies, faecal, urine, and saliva samples were obtained.

**Sputum induction and cell count**

Sputum was obtained either spontaneously, immediately after mannitol testing or induced using isotonic (0.9%) or incremental concentrations of NaCl solutions (3%, 4%, and 5%) and processed as described [35]. Four hundred non-squamous cells were counted, and the percentages of epithelial cells, eosinophils, neutrophils, macrophages and lymphocytes were listed. A cut-off of 3% for eosinophils and 61% for neutrophils was used for sputum inflammatory phenotyping [36,37].
Data were entered in an electronic case report form (SecureCRF®, Copenhagen, Denmark).

**Statistical analysis**

Continuous variables were reported as mean with standard deviations for normally distributed variables, while non-normally distributed variables were reported as median with 25th and 75th percentiles. Continuous variables were tested using Kruskal–Wallis test, while categorical variables were tested using Chi-square test. Monte Carlo simulation was used if Chi-square approximation was not met (expected cell counts <5), thereby comparing the observed data to random samples.

Analyses were performed using SAS Studio (SAS Institute, Cary, NC, USA).

**Results**

A total of 1492 participants were recruited over a 2-year period: 859 patients with asthma, 271 patients with COPD, 126 patients with asthma + COPD, and 89 healthy controls (Figure 1 and Tables 1 and 2). Moreover, 147 patients did not have asthma or COPD (‘Other’ group; supplementary Table S1).

The participants were recruited from Denmark (n = 906) and Sweden (n = 591) with approximately one-third of the participants from general practitioners and two-thirds from outpatient clinics (Table 1). The age distribution was equal between sites except for participants from Copenhagen (DK), who were younger (p < 0.001) and BMI was higher in patients from Naestved (DK) (p = 0.003).

Gender distribution was equal across groups (Table 2). The BMI did not differ between patients with asthma and COPD, whereas FEV1 percent predicted (91% vs 56%, p < 0.001) was higher in patients with asthma than those with COPD.

In general, patients reported a high degree of respiratory symptoms (Table 3). The symptom burdens depicted by ACQ-5, ACT, CAT, and mMRC scores were higher in patients with COPD than in those with asthma (p < 0.01, all), independent of the origin of the questionnaire. Among the COPD patients, specific scores of CAT >10 and mMRC ≥2 were found in 70% and 87% of the patients, respectively, and among patients with asthma, uncontrolled disease indicated by ACQ >1.5 and ACT ≤19 was found in 44% and 49%, respectively.

Based on the quality-of-life (QoL) related questionnaire SF-12, COPD and asthma + COPD patients, in general, reported a worse health-status regarding the physical (PCS), but the mental component was comparable across groups. The same tendency was seen in the activity components from MiniAQLQ, MiniRQLQ, and CCQ, which indicated a better health status for patients with asthma and Other compared to patients with COPD and asthma + COPD (p < 0.01, all).

The comorbidity-related questionnaire scores from SNOT-22 and Nijmegen did not differ significantly between the four patient groups (p = 0.45 and p = 0.60, respectively), and although the score for Epworth sleepiness scale was significantly higher in

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**Figure 1.** Consort flow diagram. Sputum was collected at specialist clinical sites only, not in primary care units; therefore, sputum samples do not exist for all participants. Bronchoscopy was performed in a subgroup of participants. Healthy controls: smokers and non-smokers. Concurrent asthma and COPD: asthma + COPD.
patients with asthma compared to COPD, asthma + COPD and Other ($p = 0.001$), all scores were within the normal range.

Comorbidities such as cardiovascular, metabolic, and orthopaedic disorders were generally more frequent in patients with COPD and asthma + COPD compared to patients with asthma and Other (all comparisons: $p < 0.01$), whereas childhood asthma (36%), atopic dermatitis (26%), and allergic rhinitis (55%) were more prevalent in patients with asthma compared to the three other patient groups ($p < 0.001$ for all) (Table 4).

Furthermore, chronic rhinosinusitis without nasal polyps (CRSsNP) was more frequently observed in asthma than in the three other patient groups ($p < 0.001$). However, CRSsNP was more frequently observed in asthma than in the three other patient groups ($p < 0.001$). However, CRSsNP was more frequently observed in asthma than in the three other patient groups ($p < 0.001$). However, CRSsNP was more frequently observed in asthma than in the three other patient groups ($p < 0.001$). However, CRSsNP was more frequently observed in asthma than in the three other patient groups ($p < 0.001$). However, CRSsNP was more frequently observed in asthma than in the three other patient groups ($p < 0.001$). However, CRSsNP was more frequently observed in asthma than in the three other patient groups ($p < 0.001$). However, CRSsNP was more frequently observed in asthma than in the three other patient groups ($p < 0.001$).

AHR to mannitol, dose–response ratio (RDR) ($p < 0.001$, both) and PD15 ($p = 0.04$) differed across the four groups but were not significantly different between patients with asthma and COPD (Table 5). A positive mannitol test was found in 331 (48%) of the 695 tested patients with asthma and in 30/47 (64%) tested patients with asthma + COPD. Reversibility was more frequent in patients with asthma and asthma + COPD than in those with COPD and Other (45% and 47% vs 21% and 8%, $p < 0.001$).

The prevalence of blood eosinophilia (>0.3×10^9/L) was not different in patients with asthma, COPD, or asthma + COPD but was lower in the Other group (Table 5). However, FeNO levels were significantly higher in patients with asthma and asthma + COPD than in those with COPD and Other (45% and 47% vs 21% and 8%, $p < 0.001$).

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COPD had higher sputum neutrophil levels compared to the three other patient groups (66.8% vs 39.3%, 43.5% and 40.8%, p < 0.001) (Table 5, suppl. Figures S2 and S3).

Atopy was significantly more frequent in patients with asthma than in patients with COPD (55% vs 13%, p < 0.001) (supplementary Table S2).

Disease severity based on GINA classification for patients with asthma (Table 6) showed that 54% had moderate to severe disease whereas 46% had mild disease. For patients with COPD, the GOLD classification showed that 82% had groups A and B disease, whereas 18% had groups C and D disease.

Discussion

The current study represents, to our knowledge, the largest clinical real-life study on patients with obstructive airway diseases: asthma, COPD, or concurrent asthma and COPD with different degrees of severity and phenotypes. With this study, we have generated a research
Table 5. Airway hyperresponsiveness and inflammatory markers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Asthma</th>
<th>COPD</th>
<th>Asthma+COPD</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Healthy</th>
<th>p-value</th>
<th>p-value*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subject n</strong></td>
<td>859</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FeNO (ppb)</strong></td>
<td>18 (11–31)</td>
<td>12.5 (7–20)</td>
<td>16 (10–25)</td>
<td>14.5 (9–21)</td>
<td>11.2 (8–16)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Patients FEV1 &lt; 70%</strong></td>
<td>42 (5%)</td>
<td>174 (64%)</td>
<td>48 (38%)</td>
<td>8 (5%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive reversibility test</strong></td>
<td>60/133 (45%)</td>
<td>46/221 (21%)</td>
<td>38/81 (47%)</td>
<td>2/24 (8%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AHR to mannitol</strong></td>
<td>331/695 (48%)</td>
<td>20/46 (44%)</td>
<td>30/47 (64%)</td>
<td>8/121 (7%)</td>
<td>4/79 (5%)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PD15 (mg)</strong></td>
<td>217.5 (80.6–413.1)</td>
<td>302.9 (141.2–406.4)</td>
<td>224.4 (47.9–320.3)</td>
<td>493.5 (293.4–566.4)</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RDR mannitol (%/mg)</strong></td>
<td>0.03 (0.01–0.07)</td>
<td>0.02 (0.02–0.03)</td>
<td>0.05 (0.02–0.18)</td>
<td>0.01 (0.002–0.01)</td>
<td>0.01 (0.003–0.01)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Blood cell count</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eosinophils (cells*10^9/L)</td>
<td>0.20 (0.1–0.3)</td>
<td>0.2 (0.1–0.3)</td>
<td>0.2 (0.1–0.3)</td>
<td>0.1 (0.1–0.2)</td>
<td>0.1 (0.1–0.2)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutrophils (cells*10^9/L)</td>
<td>3.6 (2.8–4.5)</td>
<td>4.7 (3.4–5.7)</td>
<td>4.1 (3.2–4.8)</td>
<td>1.8 (1.4–2.2)</td>
<td>3.5 (2.7–4.6)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lymphocytes (cells*10^9/L)</td>
<td>1.9 (1.6–2.3)</td>
<td>2 (1.6–2.6)</td>
<td>2 (1.6 – 2.5)</td>
<td>3.5 (2.7–4.3)</td>
<td>1.9 (1.6–2.4)</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>0.048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eosinophils &gt; 0.3 (cells*10^9/L)</td>
<td>267 (31%)</td>
<td>77 (28%)</td>
<td>45 (36%)</td>
<td>17 (12%)</td>
<td>4 (5%)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sputum cell count</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eosinophils</td>
<td>1.5 (0.27–5.5)</td>
<td>0.75 (0–3.5)</td>
<td>1.5 (0.3–5.8)</td>
<td>1.2 (0.3–3.5)</td>
<td>0 (0–2)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eosinophils ≥ 3%</td>
<td>161/419 (38%)</td>
<td>34/115 (30%)</td>
<td>26/63 (41%)</td>
<td>22/77 (29%)</td>
<td>6/43 (14%)</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutrophils</td>
<td>39.3 (15.3–64.3)</td>
<td>66.8 (40–81)</td>
<td>43.5 (22.5–68.3)</td>
<td>40.8 (25–61.5)</td>
<td>30.5 (11–63.8)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sputum inflammatory phenotype</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eosinophilic</td>
<td>119 (28%)</td>
<td>17 (15%)</td>
<td>19 (30%)</td>
<td>15 (19.5%)</td>
<td>2 (4.7%)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutrophilic</td>
<td>74 (18%)</td>
<td>43 (37%)</td>
<td>15 (24%)</td>
<td>13 (17%)</td>
<td>7 (16%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed inflammation</td>
<td>42 (10%)</td>
<td>17 (15%)</td>
<td>7 (11%)</td>
<td>7 (9%)</td>
<td>4 (9.3%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paucigranulocytic</td>
<td>184 (44%)</td>
<td>38 (33%)</td>
<td>22 (35%)</td>
<td>42 (54.5%)</td>
<td>30 (70%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data are presented as numbers (n), n/N (%), mean±SD, or median (interquartile range). AHR: airway hyperresponsiveness, defined as a decrease in FEV1 ≥15%. PD15: mannitol dose that results in a 15% fall or more in FEV1. RDR: response–dose ratio defined as % fall in FEV1 per mg of mannitol. *Asthma versus COPD.
Table 6. GOLD classification of patients with COPD and GINA classification of patients with asthma.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GINA step</th>
<th>GOLD 1</th>
<th>GOLD 2</th>
<th>GOLD 3</th>
<th>GOLD 4</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GINA 1 + 2, n (%)</td>
<td>1 (0.5)</td>
<td>4 (1.8)</td>
<td>3 (1.4)</td>
<td>1 (0.5)</td>
<td>9 (4.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GINA 3, n (%)</td>
<td>16 (7.2)</td>
<td>104 (47.1)</td>
<td>41 (18.6)</td>
<td>11 (5)</td>
<td>172 (77.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GINA 4, n (%)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (0.5)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (0.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GINA 5, n (%)</td>
<td>1 (0.5)</td>
<td>18 (8.1)</td>
<td>16 (7.2)</td>
<td>4 (1.8)</td>
<td>39 (17.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total, n (%)</td>
<td>18 (8.1)</td>
<td>126 (57.0)</td>
<td>61 (27.6)</td>
<td>16 (7.2)</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

GINA guidelines 2019. *Only Danish patients, since medication doses were not available for Swedish patients.

In this population, we found that patients with asthma and asthma + COPD had higher levels of FeNO and sputum eosinophils compared to patients with COPD; moreover, patients with asthma were more atopic, more frequently had chronic rhinosinusitis and childhood asthma and were younger than patients with COPD, asthma + COPD and Other. Conversely, patients with COPD and asthma + COPD had a higher frequency of comorbidities such as cardiovascular and metabolic disorders, lower quality of life, and patients with COPD had higher levels of sputum neutrophils. Systemic inflammation measured with blood eosinophils did not differ between patients with asthma, COPD, and asthma + COPD, which contrasts with the general assumption that asthma is more eosinophilic driven whereas COPD is neutrophilic; however, this finding is in line with previous observations [38]. When further characterizing the inflammatory phenotypes in sputum, we found that patients with asthma and asthma + COPD more often had sputum eosinophilic inflammation than patients with COPD and Other, suggesting that even though the blood eosinophil counts were comparable, patients with asthma and asthma + COPD more frequently had signs of localized eosinophilic inflammation in the airways compared to patients with COPD and Other. However, sputum eosinophilia was also observed in some patients with COPD, which points to the existence of eosinophilic COPD and highlights the importance of airway sampling when assessing inflammatory phenotypes in airway disease.

The frequency of CRSwNP in patients with asthma was lower than expected probably due to the high fraction of patients with mild to moderate disease with a low degree of blood eosinophils. Former studies on CRSwNP have primarily been performed in severe asthma or in severe CRS and in both cases, the frequency of polyps was substantially higher than in unselected, real-life patients [39–41].

Airway hyperresponsiveness (AHR) measured with a mannitol challenge test did not differ between patients with asthma and COPD, but was higher in patients with asthma + COPD and lower in the Other group – however, only very few patients with COPD had the test performed due to low level of lung function (FEV1 < 70%), which may explain these findings. Moreover, COPD patients with normal lung function and with a significant smoking history could have airway inflammation with mast cells resembling the inflammation in patients with asthma [42,43]. Likewise, AHR to mannitol was also observed in four healthy asymptomatic smokers, which may be explained by the fact that inflammation caused by smoking may be sensitive to the mannitol test, as previously described [44]. These findings suggest that categorizing the diseases as asthma, COPD, or asthma + COPD based on AHR test results may be too simple, since pathology, inflammatory phenotypes, and test results tend to overlap [45].

This study is a real-life GP/specialist-based study that included patients referred or followed in these clinical settings and it is therefore designed to show the disease burden in these patients and not in a broader epidemiological setting. The patients, in general, reported a high degree of respiratory symptoms, which may reflect the fact that approximately two-thirds of the patients were recruited after being referred for specialist evaluation. The group of patients termed Other had in-between levels of inflammation, atopy, chronic rhinosinusitis and childhood asthma, few comorbidities, average age, normal weight, and normal
lung function but with many symptoms. Some had cough or dyspnoea, but most were classified with unspecific respiratory symptoms or negative bronchial provocation tests. They may represent a cluster characterized by being highly symptomatic but with a paucigranulocytic phenotype, like the cluster suggested by Haldar et al. [46], who found a group of asthma patients, who reported having many respiratory symptoms but a low degree of inflammation.

This study offered all patients with a similar medical work-up regardless of whether the referral diagnosis was asthma, COPD, or asthma + COPD. For example, all patients completed a range of questionnaires without pre-selecting them as patients with either asthma and/or COPD, which provides a unique opportunity to further validate these questionnaires in a broader, more real-life setting where the entire spectrum of patients with obstructive airway disease is represented. Moreover, since asthma and COPD represent a continuum of airway obstruction with heterogenous inflammatory mediators, deciding on an evaluation program based on a referral note may not be the optimal way to evaluate patients. Also, the traditional classification of these diseases based on clinical manifestations that does not distinguish between cellular and molecular mechanisms in the evaluation of obstructive airway disease may not be up to date.

Limitations to our study could be that each participating centre had its own specialist focus, which affected the patient flow and resulted in an unequal distribution of patient groups from the clinical sites. On the other hand, this approach allowed each centre to focus on recruiting patients with different severities and phenotypes of the diseases; moreover, only a few doctors at each site examined all the patients, which contributed to a uniform way of interpreting test results and diagnosing patients. We do recognize that despite thorough medication history and examinations, lung function tests and questionnaires, diagnosing obstructive airway diseases can be challenging [45,47]. In this study, we chose to use mannitol for bronchial provocation tests, which has a high specificity but low sensitivity compared to methacholine, and we are therefore at risk of under-diagnosing asthma [48]. Another limitation of our study is the bronchoscopy population, which was smaller and more selected than the general study population and may not represent the entire severity spectrum of the diseases.

Standardization of clinical and laboratory procedures across borders can be challenging, and to meet these issues, we translated all standard operating procedures (SOPs) to both Danish and Swedish, had regular meetings and central scientific coordinators in each country that ensured harmonization of procedures. However, despite these efforts, lack of laboratory facilities at the primary care centres prevented the collection of processed sputum from these sites.

In conclusion, this clinical study on real-life patients with obstructive airway disease, who are thoroughly examined independently of traditional labelling, can be the future basis of cellular and biomarker evaluation of patients with obstructive airway diseases managed in the everyday clinic.

Acknowledgments

This paper is presented by the BREATHE study group.

We would like to thank all the members of the five recruiting sites for their effort and dedication in recruiting patients and the laboratory technicians Öznur Turan, Merve Melike Yilmaz and Lene W Pedersen from Respiratory Research Unit, Bispebjerg University Hospital, Copenhagen, DK, for counting of all sputum samples.

Thanks to Pharmaxis for providing the Aridol kits for the Swedish patients. And thanks to Professor Elizabeth F. Juniper, UK, for permission to use the ACQ-5, Mini-AQLQ and Mini-RQLQ questionnaires. The mMRC questionnaire was used with the permission of the Medical Research Council.

Disclosure statement

V. Backer has nothing to disclose. D.K. Klein has nothing to disclose. U. Bodtgter has nothing to disclose. K. Romberg reports personal fees for lecturing and/or attending advisory board from AstraZeneca, ALK, Boehringer, Chiesi, GSK, Meda, Novartis, and from Teva, outside the submitted work. C. Porsbjerg has nothing to disclose. Jonas S Erjefält has nothing to disclose. Karsten Kristiansen has nothing to disclose. R. Xu has nothing to disclose. Alexander Silberbrandt has nothing to disclose. Laurits Frösing has nothing to disclose. Morten Hvidtfeldt has nothing to disclose. N. Obling reports personal fees from AstraZeneca, other from Boehringer Ingelheim Denmark A/S, outside the submitted work. Linnea Jarenbäck has nothing to disclose. Abir Nasr has nothing to disclose. Ellen Tufvesson has nothing to disclose. Michiko Mori has nothing to disclose. Matilde Winther-Jensen has nothing to disclose. Lisa Karlsson has nothing to disclose. Ulf Nihlén has nothing to disclose. Thomas Veje Flintegaard has nothing to disclose. Linnea Jarenbäck has nothing to disclose. L. Bjerner reports personal fees for lecturing and/or attending advisory board from AstraZeneca, ALK, Boehringer, Chiesi, GSK, Novartis, Sanofi and from Teva, outside the submitted work.

Funding

This work was supported by the Interreg ÖKS [NYP20201002]; AstraZeneca [unrestricted grant] and TEVA [unrestricted grant]. The funders had no active role in the study.

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