Adipose-derived stromal vascular fraction (SVF) cells in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis of the hand

M. Carstens1,2,3, J.J. Montenegro4, A. Gomez2, D. Correa5,6

1Clinical Associate Professor of Plastic Surgery, Saint Louis University, St. Louis, MO, USA
2Department of Plastic Surgery, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua - León
3Asociación Pro Niños Quemados de Nicaragua (APROQUEN), Managua, Nicaragua
4Hospital Escuela Militar Dr. Alejandro Dávila Bolaños, Managua, Nicaragua
5Department of Orthopedics, Division of Sports Medicine, University of Miami, Miller School of Medicine, Miami, FL, USA
6Diabetes Research Institute and Cell Transplant Center, University of Miami, Miller School of Medicine, Miami, FL, USA

Corresponding Author: Michael Henry Carstens, MD; e-mail: michaelcarstens@mac.com

Keywords: Stromal vascular fraction, Arthritis, Fibrosis, Neovascularization.

Abstract

Objective: Rheumatoid arthritis of the hand is debilitating and difficult to manage, with medical therapies having many side effects. Control of inflammation using autologous stromal vascular fraction (SVF) cells offers a possible alternative to drug therapy. The autoimmune process of RA involves the production of inflammatory cytokines from Th1/Th17 cells. SVF contains adipose-derived stem cells (ADSCs). Via their release of paracrine factors, ADSCs reduce inflammation and enhance Treg cell function in collagen-induced arthritis. Specific inhibition of Th1/Th17 cells by ADSCs has been shown. Local infiltration of SVF is a rational strategy for treatment of the hand. We aimed at demonstrating safety and efficacy of autologous SVF in controlling symptoms of small joint RA of the hands.

Patients and Methods: Five female patients with chronic RA of five+ years duration and no steroid use were chosen. Lipoaspirate was processed to produce SVF with 238x10^5 and 895x10^5 viable cells. 1 cc of suspension was injected intra- and peri-articularly to all 15 joints with 10 cc to the dorsum. Serial measurements were performed in a 6 months follow-up: functional hand score (FHS: pain, stiffness and activities); visual analog score (VAS: pain intensity); and dynamometry (grip strength).

Results: Percentage change from baseline at six months for FHS score and VAS score was 91.3% and 91% respectively showing almost complete remission of osteoarthritic pain. The average grip strength increased 59%. Cell dose was not age-related but did vary with disease chronicity. The degree of improvement was not dose-related.

Conclusions: This first-in-man use of fresh, non-fractionated, non-expanded SVF shows that intra-articular injection is safe. Minimal dose/hand should exceed 3x10^6 cells. Data are strongly suggestive of significant therapeutic effect for small joint arthritis.

Introduction

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a chronic disease that affects multiple joints, causing pain, loss of function, and disability. Approximately 1% of the population is afflicted at an average age of 56 years for men and 54 years for women, with females being more frequently affected at a ratio of 3:1. RA typically attacks small diarthrodial joints. It is particularly devastating for the hand, causing painful flexion and opposition, affecting multiple functions critical for daily activities. Medical management strategies for rheumatoid arthritis of the hand continue to be problematic, each regimen being associated with significant side effects. The pathology of RA is biphasic, beginning with the development of autoimmunity to collagens in the joints, followed by inflammation and tissue destruction. Primary actors in this process are Th1 and Th17 cells which produce inflammatory chemokines and mediators, which
attract polymorphonuclear leukocytes and macrophages into the joint. The ensuing cascade of inflammatory factors (cytokines and free radicals) is tissue destructive. Stromal and vascular fraction nucleated cells (SVF) are readily obtained via liposuction and processing using enzymatic digestion and centrifugation of adipose lipoaspirate. SVF is a heterogeneous population of mono-nucleated cells that include adipose-derived stem cells (ADSCs) of mesenchymal phenotype, endothelial progenitor cells (EPCs), and pericytes. After processing, SVF can be transplanted into the target tissue via local injection. Mesenchymal stem cells (MSCs), when implanted, exert many local effects including tissue regeneration, neovascularization, anti-inflammation, and the control of fibrosis. The principal mechanism of action is via paracrine elaboration of multiple growth factors and cytokines. The safety and efficacy of culture-expanded ADSCs derived from SVF for the treatment of chronic limb ischemia (CLI) has been documented. Carstens et al. reported the use of non-culture-expanded, non-fractionated SVF administered at the point-of-care for CLI for the induction of in-situ angiogenesis and wound-healing. The antifibrotic effects of SVF in the treatment of subcutaneous fibrosis after burn injuries and skin graft donor sites have been documented as well. Reports documenting the treatment of osteoarthritis with bone marrow stem cells, BMSCs, and adipose-derived stem cells, ADSCs, support the concept that such therapy, when applied for hand arthritis, has the potential for pain relief and perhaps the regeneration of articular cartilage. The effects of SVF on rheumatoid arthritis have not been previously documented in humans. ADSCs have been shown in vitro to reduce inflammation and enhance Treg cells in rheumatoid arthritis. Strategies for the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis have been tested in the murine model of collagen-induced arthritis (CIA). This condition is produced by subcutaneous injection of avian (chicken) type II collagen into mice. The rationale for this treatment is predicated on: (1) the inhibition of inflammatory autoimmune responses; (2) enhancing the immunosuppressive function of Treg cells. Allogenic BMSCs induced a clone of Treg cells and suppressed the development of CIA. ASCs have also been shown to induce a different clone of Treg cells that decreased the expansion of antigen-specific Th1 and Th17 cells and produced the inhibitory immunoregulator IL-10. Given these results and given the safety profile of SVF cells administered intra-articularly and subcutaneously, a decision was taken to carry out an open label, non-randomized study. The objective of this study was to assess the safety and feasibility of non-culture-expanded, adipose-derived SVF cells administered intra-articularly and peri-articularly in five patients with symptomatic rheumatoid arthritis of the hands. The study was performed at the teaching hospital HEODRA of the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua in León. Our results demonstrate a significant therapeutic effect in the reduction of osteoarthritis pain in the small joints of the thumb and fingers.

**Materials and Methods**

**Ethics statement**

This study was approved by the Medical Ethics Committee of UNAN-Leon and by the Ministry of Health of Nicaragua (MINSA). The procedures followed were in accordance with the Ethical Standards of the Responsible Committee on Human Experimentation (Institutional and National, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua - Leon) and the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in accordance with standards of MINSA and the World Health Organization, and included consent to publish this study in all formats.

**Study design and patient selection**

Five female patients with symptomatic rheumatoid arthritis of the hands were admitted to the study. The criteria for inclusion were: documented rheumatoid arthritis affecting both hands for more than one year. Criteria for exclusion were: use of steroids, unstable cardiovascular disease at the moment of enrollment, smoking and/or the presence of chronic pulmonary disease, ongoing infection and/or sepsis, and uncontrolled diabetes.

**Procedures: SVF processing, and implantation**

**Collection and processing of SVF**

The lipoaspirate was collected into a sterile tissue-processing canister (GID SVF-1, Louisville,
Adipose-derived stromal vascular fraction (SVF) cells in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis of the hand

• Visual Analog Scale (VAS) was used to measure pain, full-scale range from 0 to 10.
• Functional hand score (FHS) was used to measure three subscales: pain, stiffness, and difficulty with activities. The FHS had a total of 12 individual questions, each one scored from 1 (no symptoms) to 5 (extreme symptoms), with a minimum score of 12 and a maximum score of 60. The raw score was adjusted to a full-scale value of 100 points by multiplying by 1.66. The functional hand score assessment is shown in Figure 1.
• Grip strength for each hand was measured using a dynamometer, with the best result chosen from five consecutive attempts and recorded in kg (Figure 2).

Statistical considerations

The evaluation was a within-groups comparison of six-month scores relative to baseline measurements using a 2-tailed paired t-test. 95% confidence intervals and Cohen’s d test were used to assess the size of the effect. No control group was used.

Results

Patient characteristics

Five female patients were enrolled with ages ranging from 38 years to 72 years. All were right-handed and ambulatory.

Safety

All liposuctions and SVF injections were well tolerated and uneventful. No complications attributed to the procedures were observed either short- or long-term, including excessive pain/discomfort, allergic/immune reactions, bleeding or infection (local or systemic). In particular, despite the injection of fluid beneath the scars, no skin necrosis occurred. The procedural data (cell yields, and viability) is presented in Table 1.

Patient demographics and cell data

The patients ranged in age from 39 to 72 years. All were right-handed. Two patients had concomitant arthritis of the shoulder with a significant limitation of motion in all planes. The biologic

CO, USA) for tissue dissociation and processing under closed conditions at all times, following the manufacturer’s instructions. It was first washed three times with sterile Lactated Ringer’s solution (at 39°C) to remove erythrocytes, leukocytes, and oils. It was then dissociated with GMP-grade collagenase (GIDzyme, GID, Louisville, CO, USA) with an additional 125 ml of additional Lactated Ringer’s solution, at a concentration of 200 CDU/ml of total volume was added to the adipose tissue with collagenase enzyme (Worthington CLS-1, Lakewood, NJ, USA) at a concentration of 200 CDU/ml of total volume. The collagenase was injected into the cannister via a sterile 0.22 micron filter (Millex-MP, Millipore, Billerica, MA, USA). The mixture was dissociated for 40 minutes by placing on an incubated benchtop orbital shaker table (MaxQ 4450, Fischer Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA) at 37°C and 150 RPM. After dissociation, human albumin solution (Baxter Healthcare, Deerfield, IL, USA) was added to achieve a concentration of 2.5% then centrifuged for 10 minutes at 800 g. The resulting SVF cell pellet at the bottom of the device was removed using a 6-inch needle (Abbocath-T, Hospira, Sligo, Ireland) connected to a 20 cc syringe with 15 ml Hartmann solution. 10 microliters of SVF were taken from the final suspension and submitted for differential staining. Two samples were then passed through an image cytometer (ADAM MC, Portsmouth, NH, USA) for counting of nucleated cells and to assess cell viability.

Administration of autologous SVF cells

The total volume of the SVF suspension was determined based on the number of joints involved, these being per hand: 15 interphalangeal and metacarpophalangeal joints, with the wrist joint space considered as a single confluent space. Using a 23-gauge needle, the cell suspension was then administered into and around the following joints: thumb carpometacarpal (CMC), metacarpals (MPs), proximal interphalangeal (PIP), and distal interphalangeal (DIP). The intra-articular dosing was 0.25 cc. Periarticular dosing consisted of 0.25 cc on either side of the joint.

Methods of assessment

Each patient was examined and completed an assessment sheet for each hand before surgery, at 3 months postop and at 6 months postop.

CO, USA) for tissue dissociation and processing under closed conditions at all times, following the manufacturer’s instructions. It was first washed three times with sterile Lactated Ringer’s solution (at 39°C) to remove erythrocytes, leukocytes, and oils. It was then dissociated with GMP-grade collagenase (GIDzyme, GID, Louisville, CO, USA) with an additional 125 ml of additional Lactated Ringer’s solution, at a concentration of 200 CDU/ml of total volume was added to the adipose tissue with collagenase enzyme (Worthington CLS-1, Lakewood, NJ, USA) at a concentration of 200 CDU/ml of total volume. The collagenase was injected into the cannister via a sterile 0.22 micron filter (Millex-MP, Millipore, Billerica, MA, USA). The mixture was dissociated for 40 minutes by placing on an incubated benchtop orbital shaker table (MaxQ 4450, Fischer Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA) at 37°C and 150 RPM. After dissociation, human albumin solution (Baxter Healthcare, Deerfield, IL, USA) was added to achieve a concentration of 2.5% then centrifuged for 10 minutes at 800 g. The resulting SVF cell pellet at the bottom of the device was removed using a 6-inch needle (Abbocath-T, Hospira, Sligo, Ireland) connected to a 20 cc syringe with 15 ml Hartmann solution. 10 microliters of SVF were taken from the final suspension and submitted for differential staining. Two samples were then passed through an image cytometer (ADAM MC, Portsmouth, NH, USA) for counting of nucleated cells and to assess cell viability.

Administration of autologous SVF cells

The total volume of the SVF suspension was determined based on the number of joints involved, these being per hand: 15 interphalangeal and metacarpophalangeal joints, with the wrist joint space considered as a single confluent space. Using a 23-gauge needle, the cell suspension was then administered into and around the following joints: thumb carpometacarpal (CMC), metacarpals (MPs), proximal interphalangeal (PIP), and distal interphalangeal (DIP). The intra-articular dosing was 0.25 cc. Periarticular dosing consisted of 0.25 cc on either side of the joint.

Methods of assessment

Each patient was examined and completed an assessment sheet for each hand before surgery, at 3 months postop and at 6 months postop.
Figure 1. SVF intake form for hand study. Form allows for recording of visual analog score (VAS) and the multi-dimensional functional hand score (FHS).

Figure 2. Dynamometer. Hand held instrument measures grip strength in kilograms and pounds. We used the average of five attempts per hand. Motivation and fatigue are factors requiring clinical support during testing to elicit maximum performance.
Table 1. Procedural data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>Viability</th>
<th>Viable cells</th>
<th>Viable cells/gm</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>341 cc</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>286,000,000</td>
<td>838,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>408 cc</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>129,000,000</td>
<td>316,000</td>
<td>childhood RA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>458 cc</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>410,000,000</td>
<td>895,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63</td>
<td>259 cc</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>61,800,000</td>
<td>261,000</td>
<td>lupus, shoulders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>330 cc</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>261,000,000</td>
<td>790,000</td>
<td>shoulders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Cell counts (Most common results: 400,000 – 600,000 cells/gm)
- 100,000 cells/gm: terrible, worst case, cold fluids, bad patient, messed up processing
- 200,000 cells/gm: low yield, bad patient, poor processing
- 400,000 cells/gm: common yield, decent processing
- 600,000 cells/gm: good yield, good processing, good patient
- 800,000 cells/gm: upper end of good yields
- 1,000,000 cells/gm: excellent processing on very good patients, but rare

... productivity of three patients, as measured by the number of viable cells per gram of dry tissue was within the expected range (500,000 to 1,000,000). This included our oldest patient, age 72 (Figure 3). As in our previous studies, the SVF cell count is not age-related, although in functionality the SVF cells may behave differently. Two of the patients, both with a significant medical background, had a low yield of viable SVF cells. Patient 2 had been ill since childhood and patient 4 had a history of active lupus.

Outcomes

Three assessment methods were used. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Functional hand score (FHS)

FHS was measured in three categories: pain, stiffness, and quality of function. Individual parameters were: night pain, pain with writing, pain on opening a jar, pain on turning a key, pain on opening a heavy (car) door, morning stiffness, evening stiffness, buttoning and unbuttoning a shirt, tying a not (as in shoes), using scissors, and holding a bag in the air (Figure 4).
- FHS is scored 0-100.
- All patients (100%) showed decreased arthritis pain in both hands as measure by the FHS. The mean preop FHS score was 50.1 and was reduced to a mean 6-month value of 4.4, for a reduction of 92%. No relapse occurred.
- The FHS revealed that the effects took place very rapidly. Patients uniformly confirmed sig-
significant improvement in the first two weeks postop. These trends were quantified at 12 weeks. For almost all parameters there was no significant change after 12 weeks. Fine motor skills did continue to improve in two patients and stiffness (both morning and evening) was progressively improved in two others.

Table 2. Hand score, visual analog pain score (VAS), and grip strength

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Pre FHS</th>
<th>Post FHS</th>
<th>% change from baseline</th>
<th>Pre VAS</th>
<th>Post VAS</th>
<th>% change from baseline</th>
<th>Pre Grip (units)</th>
<th>Post Grip (units)</th>
<th>% change from baseline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>41.6</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>43.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>79.0</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>99.8</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>91.5</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>85.3</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 10 10 10 10 10 88
mean 50.1 4.4 91.3% 6.7 0.6 91.0% 16.4 26.1 59.0%
SD 31.7 4.8 2.3 0.7 8.4 6.9

Visual analog scale (VAS)

VAS uses universal diagrams of the face to represent pain states (Haefeli) (Figure 5).
- The VAS is a 0-10 ordinal scale.
- All patients (100%) demonstrated decreased arthritic pain in both hands.
- In 4/5 the final score achieved level 1. The remaining patient dropped her scores to level 2 per hand.

Figure 4. Functional hand score (FHS). The percentage decrease from baseline is 91.3%.
• All subjects capable of using the dynamometer 8/8 hands (100%) showed an increase in grip strength. One of the five patients could not perform this test due to deformity of her MP joints and fingers that prevented her from grasping the instrument.

Grip strength (kg)
Grip strength was measured in each of 8 hands. Five attempts were made with each hand and the results summarized (Figure 6).

• The mean preop value of 16.4 kg increased to a 6-month value of 26.1 kg, for an increase of 59%.

![Figure 5](image-url)
**Figure 5.** Visual analog score (VAS). The percentage decrease from baseline is 91%

![Figure 6](image-url)
**Figure 6.** Grip strength. The percentage increase from baseline is 59%
Table 3. Statistical results for within-group comparison.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hand score</th>
<th>VAS</th>
<th>Grip strength</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>p-value (2-tailed)</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95% CI</td>
<td>29.5-69.9</td>
<td>4.3-7.9</td>
<td>5.0-14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohen’s d</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• Grip strength continued to improve over time for 4/5 patients, the fifth patient’s hands being too deformed to hold the dynamometer. Although this test is very quantitative, it is effort dependent and, by using five serial measurements per hand per session, some artifact may exist due to patient fatigue.

All three metrics showed strong statistical significance comparing 6-month scores relative to baseline scores (Table 3). The lower bound of the 95% confidence intervals for the difference score for each scale is greater than zero, showing superiority of the 6-month scores relative to the baseline scores. The effect size (Cohen’s d) for both the FHS and the VAS is huge, and the effect size for the grip strength is very large, using Cohen’s d-scale for effect size (Table 4).

In sum, the percentage change from baseline for the hand score and the VAS scores were 91.3% and 91%, respectively, indicating an almost complete remission of osteoarthritic pain at 6 months. The average grip strength change from baseline was an increase of 59% over baseline. All subjects (100%) showed decreased osteoarthritic pain in both the hand score and the VAS score. All subjects (100%) showed an increase in grip strength. One subject was not able to grasp the grip dynamometer (both left and right hands).

CHUCK PINCH RESTORED

Video at 6 months demonstrating increase chuck pinch to turn the key to open a door handle (https://youtu.be/_jUcaM3GrSY)

Table 4. Cohen’s d Effect Size

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>d</th>
<th>0.01</th>
<th>0.2</th>
<th>0.5</th>
<th>0.8</th>
<th>1.2</th>
<th>2.0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effect size</td>
<td>Very small</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Very large</td>
<td>Huge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The study evaluates the change in pain scores relative to baseline measurements. No control group was used. Statistical evaluation is a within-groups comparison of the 6-month scores relative to the baseline as measured by the 2-tailed paired t-test. Table 3 shows the results of the within-groups testing for these three metrics. 95% confidence intervals are shown for the difference scores for each group. Table 4 explains how Cohen’s d test is used to assess the size of the effect. All three metrics above showed strong statistical significance comparing 6-month scores relative to baseline scores. The lower bound of the 95% confidence intervals showed a 95% confidence that the means of the 6-month scores are less than the means of the baseline scores for both PSQ and VAS. There is a 95% confidence that the mean of the 6-month grip strength is greater than the mean of the baseline grip strength. By Cohen’s definition, the effect size for PSQ and VAS strength is huge and for grip strength is very large.

DISCUSSION

This first-in-man, small, open-label, non-randomized, no control group safety/feasibility study describes clinical outcomes obtained when fresh, non-fractionated, not culture-expanded, adipose tissue-derived autologous SVF is administered to treat patients with rheumatoid arthritis of the hand. The rationale for using SVF instead of expanded ADSCs was twofold: first, to test the feasibility of a point-of-care administration of a cell-based therapy approach; and second, to take advantage of the presence of additional regenerative cell populations within the heterogeneous SVF. This study has recognizable limitations. It involves a small number of patients and is non-randomized. In addition, due to logistical difficulties in getting the patients to the center more frequently, the acquisition of intermediate data points was lim-
Adipose-derived stromal vascular fraction (SVF) cells in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis of the hand

The data are strongly suggestive of a significant therapeutic effect, specifically the reduction of osteoarthritic pain in the finger/thumb joints. We conclude that implantation of adipose-derived SVF cells represents a biologically rational point-of-care cell-based therapy for symptomatic patients with rheumatoid arthritis of the hand. SVF implantation offers the possibility of relief from pain, while improving stiffness and range of motion. Use of this intervention early in the course of the arthritis could halt or retard the progression of the disease. In addition, it could improve the appearance and function of scars.

**DECLARATION OF FUNDING INTERESTS**
Devices and enzymes for this study were donated by the GID Group

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**
Ministry of Health, Nicaragua (Ministerio de Salud y Asistencia, MINSA) for review and approval of this project
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua - Leon for Ethics Committee review

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT**
Michael Carstens consults for the GID Group. The remaining authors declare that they have no competing interests.

**ETHICAL COMMITTEE**
This study was approved by the Medical Ethics Committee of UNAN-Leon and by the Ministry of Health of Nicaragua (MINSA). The procedures followed were in accordance with the Ethical Standards of the Responsible Committee on Human Experimentation (Institutional and National, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua - Leon) and the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000.

**INFORMED CONSENT**
Informed consent was obtained from all participants in accordance with standards of MINSA and the World Health Organization, and included consent to publish this study in all formats.

**REFERENCES**


