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Safety of Bariatric Surgery in ≥ 65 -Year-Old Patients During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Rishi Singhal^{1,2}  · Islam Omar³ · Brijesh Madhok⁴ · Yashasvi Rajeev⁵ · Yitka Graham^{6,7} · Abd A. Tahrani^{8,9,10} · Christian Ludwig¹¹ · Tom Wiggins¹ · Kamal Mahawar^{6,12} · On behalf of the GENEVA Collaborators

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Abstract

Background Age ≥ 65 years is regarded as a relative contraindication for bariatric surgery. Advanced age is also a recognised risk factor for adverse outcomes with Coronavirus Disease-2019 (COVID-19) which continues to wreak havoc on global populations. This study aimed to assess the safety of bariatric surgery (BS) in this particular age group during the COVID-19 pandemic in comparison with the younger cohort.

Methods We conducted a prospective international study of patients who underwent BS between 1/05/2020 and 31/10/2020. Patients were divided into two groups — patients ≥ 65 -years-old (Group I) and patients < 65 -years-old (Group II). The two groups were compared for 30-day morbidity and mortality.

Results There were 149 patients in Group 1 and 6923 patients in Group II. The mean age, preoperative weight, and BMI were 67.6 ± 2.5 years, 119.5 ± 24.5 kg, and 43 ± 7 in Group I and 39.8 ± 11.3 years, 117.7 ± 20.4 kg, and 43.7 ± 7 in Group II, respectively. Approximately, 95% of patients in Group 1 had at least one co-morbidity compared to 68% of patients in Group 2 ($p = < 0.001$).

The 30-day morbidity was significantly higher in Group I (11.4%) compared to Group II (6.6%) ($p = 0.022$). However, the 30-day mortality and COVID-19 infection rates were not significantly different between the two groups.

Conclusions Bariatric surgery during the COVID-19 pandemic is associated with a higher complication rate in those ≥ 65 years of age compared to those < 65 years old. However, the mortality and postoperative COVID-19 infection rates are not significantly different between the two groups.

Keywords Obesity · Older patients · SARS-CoV-2 · Resuming elective surgery · Metabolic surgery

Introduction

Bariatric surgery is currently the only evidence-based durable treatment option for patients with obesity and related comorbidities. An ageing population worldwide

presents a challenge to all healthcare practitioners, including those involved in providing obesity management services [1, 2]. Previously, advanced age was considered a relative contraindication for bariatric surgery [3]. However, the evolution of laparoscopic techniques and advances in perioperative care protocols have changed perceptions [4, 5].

While some studies confirm good weight loss and acceptable postoperative morbidity and mortality in older individuals, others show significant perioperative morbidity and mortality with varying weight loss results [6–8]. Additionally, the heterogeneity of the studies with different age cutoff points and definitions of the older patients' population prevents the generalisation of these results [9, 10].

Older age is associated with an unfavourable prognosis with COVID-19 should a patient undergoing bariatric

Key Points

- This study compared the safety of bariatric surgery in patients ≥ 65 years of age with those < 65 years of age during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The 30-day morbidity was higher in those ≥ 65 years of age.
- The 30-day mortality and postoperative symptomatic COVID-19 infection rates were not significantly different between the two groups.

✉ Rishi Singhal
Singhal_rishi@hotmail.com

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

Table 1 Comparison between the two groups according to demographics

	Group I (≥ 65) ($n=149\#$)	Group II (< 65) ($n=6923\#$)	χ^2	p
Age				
Min.–max.	65–76	17–64		
Mean \pm SD	67.6 \pm 2.5	39.8 \pm 11.3		
Sex				
Female	102 (68.5%)	5085 (73.5%)	1.869	0.172
Male	47 (31.5%)	1837 (26.5%)		
Preoperative Weight (Kg)				
Min.–max.	52–268	72–178	U =	0.695
Mean \pm SD	119.5 \pm 24.5	117.7 \pm 20.4	506083.0	
Calculated Preoperative BMI				
Min.–max.	18–100.6	29–68.7	t = 1.208	0.227
Mean \pm SD	43 \pm 7	43.7 \pm 7		
White vs non white				
No	23 (15.4%)	1780 (25.7%)	8.107*	0.004*
Yes	126 (84.6%)	5143 (74.3%)		
Ethnicity of patient				
I, American Indian or Alaska Native	0 (0%)	10 (0.1%)		
II, Asian	8 (5.4%)	390 (5.6%)		
III, Black or African American	1 (0.7%)	86 (1.2%)		
IV, Hispanic or Latino	14 (9.4%)	1280 (18.5%)		
V, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0 (0%)	14 (0.2%)		
VI, White	126 (84.6%)	5143 (74.3%)		

χ^2 : Chi-square test; p : p -value for comparing the two studied groups; *Statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$; #Cases with missing data were excluded from the comparison between the two age groups; # p -value excluded *missing data* from comparing the studied groups

I: American Indian or Alaska Native. A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America), and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment

II: Asian. A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam

III: Black or African American. A person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa. Terms such as 'Haitian' or 'Negro' can be used in addition to 'Black or African American'

IV: Hispanic or Latino. A person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race. The term, 'Spanish origin', can be used in addition to 'Hispanic or Latino'.

V: Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands

VI: White. A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa

surgery develop perioperative COVID-19 infection. At the same time, obesity and its associated comorbidities also increase the risk of adverse outcomes with COVID-19 [11–13]. This poses a dilemma for healthcare professionals dealing with older patients seeking bariatric surgery.

The present study aimed to understand the safety of bariatric surgery in ≥ 65 -years-old patients during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study was a subset analysis of the GENEVA dataset; a global study aimed to prospectively assess the safety of bariatric surgery during the COVID-19 pandemic [14–16].

Methods

Study Design, Setting, and Population

The GENEVA study was a global, multicentre, observational study of Bariatric Surgery (elective primary, elective revisional, and emergency) performed between 1/05/2020 and 31/10/2020 in the adult (≥ 18 years) population. The detailed methods have been described elsewhere [14–16].

Table 2 Comparison between the two groups according to comorbidity and smoking status

	Group I (≥ 65)	Group II (< 65)	χ^2	<i>p</i>
Any comorbidity	(<i>n</i> = 149)	(<i>n</i> = 6923)		
No	8 (5.4%)	2193 (31.7%)	47.093*	< 0.001*
Yes	141 (94.6%)	4730 (68.3%)		
Type 2 diabetes not on medication	(<i>n</i> = 149)	(<i>n</i> = 6923)		
No	144 (96.6%)	6507 (94%)	1.834	0.176
Yes	5 (3.4%)	416 (6%)		
Type 2 diabetes on oral medication	(<i>n</i> = 149)	(<i>n</i> = 6923)		
No	98 (65.8%)	6116 (88.3%)	69.708*	< 0.001*
Yes	51 (34.2%)	807 (11.7%)		
Type 2 diabetes on insulin)	(<i>n</i> = 149)	(<i>n</i> = 6923)		
No	126 (84.6%)	6694 (96.7%)	62.438*	< 0.001*
Yes	23 (15.4%)	229 (3.3%)		
Overall diabetes	(<i>n</i> = 149)	(<i>n</i> = 6923)		
No	77 (51.7%)	5524 (79.8%)	69.983*	< 0.001*
Yes	72 (48.3%)	1399 (20.2%)		
Hypertension	(<i>n</i> = 149)	(<i>n</i> = 6923)		
No	38 (25.5%)	4851 (70.1%)	135.764*	< 0.001*
Yes	111 (74.5%)	2072 (29.9%)		
Sleep apnea not on CPAP	(<i>n</i> = 149)	(<i>n</i> = 6923)		
No	126 (84.6%)	6091 (88%)	1.604	0.205
Yes	23 (15.4%)	832 (12%)		
Sleep apnea on CPAP	(<i>n</i> = 149)	(<i>n</i> = 6923)		
No	111 (74.5%)	6014 (86.9%)	19.254*	< 0.001*
Yes	38 (25.5%)	909 (13.1%)		
Hypercholesterolemia	(<i>n</i> = 149)	(<i>n</i> = 6923)		
No	87 (58.4%)	5461 (78.9%)	36.233*	< 0.001*
Yes	62 (41.6%)	1462 (21.1%)		
Other comorbidities	(<i>n</i> = 149)	(<i>n</i> = 6923)		
No	87 (58.4%)	4926 (71.2%)	11.516*	0.001*
Yes	62 (41.6%)	1997 (28.8%)		
Smoking status	(<i>n</i> = 149)	(<i>n</i> = 6922 [#])		
Current smoker	11 (7.4%)	1027 (14.8%)	28.300*	< 0.001*
Ex-smoker	40 (26.8%)	887 (12.8%)		
Non-smoker	98 (65.8%)	5008 (72.3%)		

χ^2 : Chi-square test; FE: Fisher Exact; *p*: *p*-value for comparing the two studied groups; *Statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$; #Cases with missing data were excluded from the comparison between the two groups CPAP, continuous positive airway pressure

We used 65 years as a cutoff point to define the older age group as per the World Health Organisation and The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) definitions [17, 18]. We divided patients undergoing primary BS into two groups — those ≥ 65 years old (Group I) and those < 65 years old (Group II). The two groups were compared with each other with regard to basic demographics, 30-day morbidity and mortality, postoperative symptomatic COVID-19 infection rates, and procedure choice.

The main outcome measures of this study were 30-day all-cause and COVID-19 specific morbidity and

mortality. Continuous data were presented as mean \pm standard deviation (SD) or median (IQR) depending on data distribution. Frequencies were used to summarise categorical variables. Independent *t*-test or Mann Whitney U test examined differences between continuous variables depending on data distribution. A chi-square test or Fisher's exact test was used to compare categorical variables. Significance levels were set at $p < 0.05$. Statistical analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) statistical software, version 27.0 (SPSS Inc).

Table 3 Comparison between the two age groups according to the surgical procedures

	Group I (≥ 65) ($n=149$)	Group II (< 65) ($n=6923$)	χ^2	p
Surgical procedure				
LSG	76 (51%)	3907 (56.4%)	5.111	0.164
RYGB	49 (32.9%)	2038 (29.4%)		
OAGB	13 (8.7%)	689 (10%)		
Others	11 (7.4%)	289 (4.2%)		

χ^2 : Chi-square test; p : p -value for comparing between the two studied groups; *Statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$

LSG, laparoscopic sleeve gastrectomy; OAGB, one anastomosis gastric bypass; RYGB, Roux-en-Y gastric bypass

Results

Data were collected from 179 centres in 42 countries by 470 surgeons (Appendix 1). Seven thousand ninety-two adult patients who underwent primary BS between 01/05/2020 and 31/10/2020 were included. Complete 30-day morbidity and mortality data were available for 7084 (99.88%) patients. The mean age of the entire cohort was 40.35 ± 11.9 years, and 5197 (73.4%) were females. The mean preoperative weight and body mass index (BMI) was 119.49 ± 24.4 Kg and 43.03 ± 6.9 Kg/m², respectively.

Table 1 compares the demographics of the two groups. The mean age for group I was 67.6 ± 2.5 years, and for group II was 39.8 ± 11.3 years. Group I included more patients of white ethnicity (84.6%) than Group II (74.3%) ($p = 0.004$). The rest of the demographic parameters, including pre-operative BMI and weight, were comparable between the two groups (Table 1).

Table 2 details the prevalence of comorbidities and smoking status in the two groups. Nearly 95% of patients in Group I had at least one co-morbidity compared to 68% of patients in Group II ($p = < 0.001$). Specifically, a significantly greater proportion of patients in Group I suffered from diabetes mellitus (DM) (48.3% vs 20.2%), hypertension (74.5% vs 29.9%), obstructive sleep apnoea requiring continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) therapy (25.5% vs 13.1%), and hypercholesterolemia (41.6% vs 21.1%) compared to Group II (all comparisons $p = < 0.001$) (Table 2). In Group II, 14.8% of patients were current smokers, compared to 7.4% of Group I ($p = < 0.001$).

The most common operation type in both groups was laparoscopic sleeve gastrectomy (LSG) (Group 1: 51.0%; Group 2: 56.4%). This was followed by Roux-en-Y gastric bypass (RYGB) (Group 1: 32.9%; Group 2: 29.4%) and one-anastomosis gastric bypass (OAGB) (Group 1: 8.7%; Group 2: 10.0%). Other forms of procedures were performed in 7.4% (Group 1) and 4.2% (Group 2) of

individuals. There were no significant differences in procedure choice between the two groups ($p = 0.164$) (Table 3).

There were significantly more complications in Group I (11.4%) compared to Group II (6.6%) ($p = 0.022$; Table 4). There was one (0.7%) mortality in Group I and eight (0.1%) in Group II ($p = 0.17$ on Fisher's exact test). Additionally, 38 (0.5%) patients in Group II had symptomatic COVID-19 infection within 30 days of the surgical operation compared to none in Group I ($p = 1.000$).

Table 5 presents 30-day morbidity and mortality analysed by procedure type in both groups. Differences in morbidity and mortality were only significant for LSG.

Discussion

This study has demonstrated that 30-day morbidity was significantly higher for patients ≥ 65 years of age receiving bariatric surgery compared to those < 65 years of age during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there was no significant difference in 30-day mortality or 30-day symptomatic post-operative COVID-19 infection rates between the two groups.

The finding of increased 30-day morbidity in patients ≥ 65 years old maybe because 94.6% of patients in Group I had at least one co-morbidity compared to 68.3% in Group II. This is similar to the findings by Susmallian et al. who identified that 77% of patients ≥ 65 years of age had at least one comorbidity [7]. Similarly, Bhandari et al. demonstrated that 47.3%, 84.2%, and 17.9% of patients ≥ 65 years old

Table 4 Comparison between the two age groups according to the outcome parameters

	Group I (≥ 65) ($n=149$)	Group II (< 65) ($n=6923$)	χ^2	p
Complications				
No	132 (88.6%)	6463 (93.4%)	5.265*	0.022*
Yes	17 (11.4%)	460 (6.6%)		
Clavien-Dindo (CD) Score				
0	132 (88.6%)	6463 (93.4%)		
1	3 (2%)	162 (2.3%)		
2	4 (2.7%)	132 (1.9%)		
3A	4 (2.7%)	29 (0.4%)		
3B	4 (2.7%)	91 (1.3%)		
4A	1 (0.7%)	31 (0.4%)		
4B	0 (0%)	7 (0.1%)		
5 (Mortality)	1 (0.7%)	8 (0.1%)		
COVID within 30 days				
No	149 (100%)	6885 (99.5%)	0.822	FE $p=1.000$
Yes	0 (0%)	38 (0.5%)		

χ^2 : Chi-square test; FE: Fisher Exact; p : p -value for comparing the two studied groups; *Statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$

CD, Clavien-Dindo Score; COVID, Novel Coronavirus 2019

Table 5 Morbidity and Mortality rates in each group sub-divided by procedure type

		Overall	Group I	Group II	<i>p</i> -value
Total patients		(<i>n</i> = 7072)	(<i>n</i> = 149)	(<i>n</i> = 6923)	CD grade as a binary variable
LSG	30-day Morbidity	233/3983 (5.8%)	12/76 (15.8%)	221/3907 (5.7%)	< 0.001
	30-day mortality	4/3983 (0.10%)	1/76 (1.32%)	3/3907 (0.08%)	
RYGB	30-day Morbidity	166/2087 (8.0%)	4/49 (8.2%)	162/2038 (7.9%)	0.956
	30-day mortality	0	0	0	
OAGB	30-day Morbidity	53/702 (7.5%)	0/13	53/689 (7.7%)	0.298
	30-day mortality	3/702 (0.43%)	0	3/689 (0.44%)	
Other	30-day Morbidity	25/300 8.3%	1/11 (9.1%)	24/289 (8.3%)	0.926
	30-day mortality	2/300 (0.67%)	0	2/289 (0.69%)	

LSG, laparoscopic sleeve gastrectomy; OAGB, one anastomosis gastric bypass; RYGB, Roux-en-Y gastric bypass

Chi-square test performed (age more than 65 compared against presence/ absence of morbidity/ mortality)

suffered from diabetes, hypertension, and coronary heart disease compared to 20.1%, 23.4%, and 3.8%, respectively, in the younger age group [19].

The 30-day morbidity in our series was significantly higher in the older patients at 11.4% compared to 6.6% in the younger age group. A previous analysis of the National Surgical Quality Improvement Program (NSQIP) database demonstrated similar findings with increased rates of serious morbidity in the older age group compared to younger patients [20]. Another study reported a higher overall complication rate of 8.42% in older patients compared to 5.59% in the younger group, with significant differences in CD grades 3B and 4A [7].

In the current study, there was one mortality in the older age group (*n* = 149) and eight in the younger group (*n* = 6923), representing 0.7% and 0.1%, respectively. Though the difference did not reach statistical significance, this may be due to the small sample size. Bariatric teams should, therefore, be careful in offering bariatric surgery to patients in this age group. In contrast, a recent meta-analysis found that the mortality rate after LSG was similar at 0.2% in patients > 60 years and those ≤ 60 years of age whereas the mortality after RYGB was 2.2% and 0% (0/182), respectively [21]. However, those authors used 60 years as the cutoff which is no longer used to define older patients by WHO and other such bodies.

LSG was unsurprisingly the most commonly performed operation type in both groups (Group 1: 51.0%; Group 2: 56.4%) (Table 3). Importantly, there were no significant differences in procedure choice between the two groups.

Although the 30-day morbidity was significantly higher for LSG with Group I (15.8% vs 5.7%), it is difficult to draw firm conclusions from this due to the relatively low patient numbers (*n* = 76). All other procedures had comparable morbidity rates in both groups but once again there is potential for type II error due to small numbers. We cannot make any justifiable conclusions regarding morbidity and mortality of different procedures in two groups based on the data in our study. Authors would however suggest that procedure selection is made in the usual manner on an individualised basis for each patient taking into account their wishes and specific characteristics.

Strengths and Weaknesses

This study has several weaknesses. Firstly, it only included data from participating centres and might therefore not represent the complete global picture. Additionally, we cannot guarantee that all contributors submitted all their consecutive patients during the study period, though collaborators were repeatedly reminded to do so. It is also possible that all adverse outcomes were not reported, but it is hoped that anonymous data collection and reporting would have discouraged any underreporting. Lastly, there were only 149 patients in the older age group, meaning that there is a potential for Type II error concerning the difference in mortality which indeed appears to be higher in the older population (0.7% vs 0.1%).

At the same time, this is the first international study examining the safety of bariatric surgery in those ≥ 65 years

of age during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is known to have affected older people disproportionately. Moreover, this study included a broad range of patients representing a wide range of demographics, geographical distribution, stage of COVID-19 pandemic severity in the host population, and surgeon and centre experiences. Other strengths of this study include the large sample size, the global reach of the study, high data completion rate, and nearly complete follow-up.

Conclusion

Bariatric surgery during the COVID-19 pandemic was associated with higher 30-day morbidity in older patients (≥ 65 years old) compared to younger patients. The mortality and postoperative COVID-19 infection rates were comparable to the younger age group.

Author Contribution RS: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis. IO: formal analysis, writing — original draft preparation, discussion of the results, writing — review & editing. BM, YR, YG, AAT, CL, and TW: investigation, data curation. KM: conceptualization, methodology, writing — review & editing, supervision. All authors have seen the final manuscript and approved it. The study was designed and conducted by the study group and the authors on behalf of GENEVA collaborators.

Geneva Collaborators

- 1 Michał Pędziwiatr 2nd Department of General Surgery, Jagiellonian University Medical College, Krakow, Poland
- 2 Piotr Major 2nd Department of General Surgery, Jagiellonian University Medical College, Krakow, Poland
- 3 Piotr Zarzycki 2nd Department of General Surgery, Jagiellonian University Medical College, Krakow, Poland
- 4 Athanasios Pantelis 4th Surgical Department, Evaggelismos General Hospital of Athens, Athens, Greece
- 5 Dimitris P. Lapatsanis 4th Surgical Department, Evaggelismos General Hospital of Athens, Athens, Greece
- 6 Georgios Stravodimos 4th Surgical Department, Evaggelismos General Hospital of Athens, Athens, Greece
- 7 Chris Matthys A Z Sint Elisabeth Zottegem, Belgium
- 8 Marc Focquet A Z Sint Elisabeth Zottegem, Belgium
- 9 Wouter Vleeschouwers A Z Sint Elisabeth Zottegem, Belgium
- 10 Antonio G Spaventa ABC Medical Center Santa Fe, Mexico City, Mexico
- 11 Carlos Zerrweck ABC Medical Center Santa Fe, Mexico City, Mexico
- 12 Antonio Vitiello Advanced Biomedical Sciences Department - Naples “Federico II” University - Italy
- 13 Giovanna Berardi Advanced Biomedical Sciences Department - Naples “Federico II” University - Italy
- 14 Mario Musella Advanced Biomedical Sciences Department - Naples “Federico II” University - Italy
- 15 Alberto Sanchez-Meza Advanced Medicine Institute. Reynosa, MEXICO

- 16 Felipe J Cantu Jr Advanced Medicine Institute. Reynosa, MEXICO
- 17 Fernando Mora Advanced Medicine Institute. Reynosa, MEXICO
- 18 Marco A Cantu Advanced Medicine Institute. Reynosa, MEXICO
- 19 Abhishek Katakwar AIG hospital, Hyderabad, India
- 20 D Nageshwar Reddy AIG hospital, Hyderabad, India
- 21 Haitham Elmaleh Ain Shams University Hospitals
- 22 Mohammad Hassan Ain Shams University Hospitals
- 23 Abdelrahman Elghandour Ain Shams University Hospitals
- 24 Mohey Elbanna Ain Shams University Hospitals
- 25 Ahmed Osman Ain Shams University Hospitals, Cairo, Egypt
- 26 Athar Khan Al shark hospital fujairah UAE
- 27 Laurent layani Al shark hospital fujairah UAE
- 28 Nalini kiran Al shark hospital fujairah UAE
- 29 Andrey Velikorechin American Medical Clinic, Saint Petersburg, Russia
- 30 Maria Solovyeva American Medical Clinic, Saint Petersburg, Russia
- 31 Hamid Melali Amin University Hospital, Isfahan, Iran
- 32 Shahab Shahabi Amin University Hospital, Isfahan, Iran
- 33 Ashish Agrawal Apoorv Hi Tech at Gokuldas Hospital
- 34 Apoorv Shrivastava Apoorv Hi Tech at Gokuldas Hospital
- 35 Ankur Sharma Asian Bariatrics, Ahmedabad, India
- 36 Bhavya Narwaria Asian Bariatrics, Ahmedabad, India
- 37 Mahendra Narwaria Asian Bariatrics, Ahmedabad, India
- 38 Asnat Raziell Assuta Medical Center, Tel Aviv, Israel
- 39 Nasser Sakran Assuta Medical Center, Tel Aviv, Israel
- 40 Sergio Susmallian Assuta Medical Center, Tel Aviv, Israel
- 41 Levent Karagöz Atasam Hospitals, Samsun, Turkey
- 42 Murat Akbaba Atasam Hospitals, Samsun, Turkey
- 43 Salih Zeki Pişkin Atasam Hospitals, Samsun, Turkey
- 44 Ahmet Ziya BALTA AZBariatrics Obesity Center, Istanbul
- 45 Zafer Senol AZBariatrics Obesity Center, Istanbul
- 46 Emilio Manno Bariatric and Metabolic surgery Unit Ospedale A. Cardarelli Napoli Italia
- 47 Michele Giuseppe Iovino Bariatric and Metabolic surgery Unit Ospedale A. Cardarelli Napoli Italia
- 48 Ahmed Osman Bariatric Surgery Department, Faculty of Medicine, Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt
- 49 Mohamed Qassem Bariatric Surgery Department, Faculty of Medicine, Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt
- 50 Sebastián Arana-Garza Bariatric Surgery Experts, Monterrey, Mexico
- 51 Heitor P. Povoas BAROS - Bariatric and Metabolic Surgery, Salvador, Brazil
- 52 Marcos Leão Vilas-Boas BAROS - Bariatric and Metabolic Surgery, Salvador, Brazil
- 53 Alan Li BMI Alexandra Hospital, Manchester, UK
- 54 Basil J Ammori Burjeel Hospital, Abu Dhabi, UAE
- 55 Hany Balamoun Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt
- 56 Mohammed Salman Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt
- 57 Amrit Manik Nasta Center of Metabolic Surgery, Wockhardt Hospital, Agripada, Mumbai, India
- 58 Ramen Goel Center of Metabolic Surgery, Wockhardt Hospital, Agripada, Mumbai, India
- 59 Hugo Sánchez-Aguilar Center of Nutrition and Obesity, ABC Medical Center (Observatorio), Mexico City
- 60 Miguel F Herrera Center of Nutrition and Obesity, ABC Medical Center (Observatorio), Mexico City
- 61 Adel ABO-MRAD Centre Hospitalier Regional d'ORLEANS
- 62 Lucie CLOIX Centre Hospitalier Regional d'ORLEANS
- 63 Guilherme Silva Mazzini Centro de Obesidade do Instituto do Aparelho Digestivo, Porto Alegre, Brazil

- 64 Leonardo Kristem Centro de Obesidade do Instituto do Aparelho Digestivo, Porto Alegre, Brazil
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- 70 Octávio Viveiros Centro Multidisciplinar da Doença Metabólica, Clínica Santo Antonio - Lusiadas, Amadora, Portugal
- 71 Rui Ribeiro Centro Multidisciplinar da Doença Metabólica, Clínica Santo Antonio - Lusiadas, Amadora, Portugal
- 72 David Goitein Chaim Sheba Medical Center, Affiliated with Sackler School of Medicine, Tel Aviv University, Ramat Gan, Israel
- 73 David Hazzan Chaim Sheba Medical Center, Affiliated with Sackler School of Medicine, Tel Aviv University, Ramat Gan, Israel
- 74 Lior Segev Chaim Sheba Medical Center, Affiliated with Sackler School of Medicine, Tel Aviv University, Ramat Gan, Israel
- 75 Tamar Beck Chaim Sheba Medical Center, Affiliated with Sackler School of Medicine, Tel Aviv University, Ramat Gan, Israel
- 76 Hernán Reyes Christus Muguerza Sur, Monterrey, Mexico
- 77 Jerónimo Monterrubio Christus Muguerza Sur, Monterrey, Mexico
- 78 Paulina García Christus Muguerza Sur, Monterrey, Mexico
- 79 Marine Benois CHU Félix Guyon, la Réunion, France
- 80 Radwan Kassir CHU Félix Guyon, la Réunion, France
- 81 Alessandro Contine Città di Castello Hospital, Usl Umbria 1, Città di Castello - Italy
- 82 Moustafa Elshafei Clinic for Metabolic Surgery, Krankenhaus Nordwest, Frankfurt, Germany
- 83 Sueleyman Aktas Clinic for Metabolic Surgery, Krankenhaus Nordwest, Frankfurt, Germany
- 84 Sylvia Weiner Clinic for Metabolic Surgery, Krankenhaus Nordwest, Frankfurt, Germany
- 85 Till Heidsieck Clinic for Metabolic Surgery, Krankenhaus Nordwest, Frankfurt, Germany
- 86 Luis Level Clínica Santa Sofía, Caracas, Venezuela
- 87 Silvia Pinango Clínica Santa Sofía, Caracas, Venezuela
- 88 Patricia Martinez Ortega Clinica Universidad de Navarra. Pamplona. Spain
- 89 Rafael Moncada Clinica Universidad de Navarra. Pamplona. Spain
- 90 Victor Valenti Clinica Universidad de Navarra. Pamplona. Spain
- 91 Ivan Vlahović Clinical Hospital Centre Osijek, Osijek, Croatia
- 92 Zdenko Boras Clinical Hospital Centre Osijek, Osijek, Croatia
- 93 Arnaud Liagre Clinique des Cedres, Cornebarrieu, France
- 94 Francesco Martini Clinique des Cedres, Cornebarrieu, France
- 95 Gildas Juglard Clinique des Cedres, Cornebarrieu, France
- 96 Manish Motwani COMS, Apollo Spectra Hospital, New Delhi, India
- 97 Sukhvinder Singh Saggi COMS, Apollo Spectra Hospital, New Delhi, India
- 98 Hazem Al Momani Danat Al Emarat Hospital, Abu Dhabi, UAE
- 99 Luis Adolfo Aceves López Defeat Obesity Bariatric and Metabolic Surgery, CHRISTUS MUGUERZA Hospital Reynosa, Reynosa, Tamaulipas.
- 100 María Angelina Contreras Cortez Defeat Obesity Bariatric and Metabolic Surgery, CHRISTUS MUGUERZA Hospital Reynosa, Reynosa, Tamaulipas.
- 101 Rodrigo Aceves Zavala Defeat Obesity Bariatric and Metabolic Surgery, CHRISTUS MUGUERZA Hospital Reynosa, Reynosa, Tamaulipas.
- 102 Christine D'Haese RN Delta CHIREC hospital, Brussels Belgium
- 103 Ivo Kempeneers Delta CHIREC hospital, Brussels Belgium
- 104 Jacques Himpens Delta CHIREC hospital, Brussels Belgium
- 105 Andrea Lazzati Department of General Surgery, Center Hospitalier Intercommunal de Créteil, Paris, France
- 106 Luca Paolino Department of General Surgery, Center Hospitalier Intercommunal de Créteil, Paris, France
- 107 Sarah Bathaei Department of General Surgery, Center Hospitalier Intercommunal de Créteil, Paris, France
- 108 Abdulkadir Bedirli Department of General Surgery, Gazi University Faculty of Medicine, Turkey
- 109 Aydın Yavuz Department of General Surgery, Gazi University Faculty of Medicine, Turkey
- 110 Çağrı Büyükkasap Department of General Surgery, Gazi University Faculty of Medicine, Turkey
- 111 Safa Özaydın Department of General Surgery, Gazi University Faculty of Medicine, Turkey
- 112 Andrzej Kwiatkowski Department of General Surgery, Military Institute of Medicine, Szaserów 128, 04-141, Warsaw, Poland
- 113 Katarzyna Bartosiak Department of General Surgery, Military Institute of Medicine, Szaserów 128, 04-141, Warsaw, Poland
- 114 Maciej Waleździak Department of General Surgery, Military Institute of Medicine, Szaserów 128, 04-141, Warsaw, Poland
- 115 Antonella Santonicola Department of Public Health, "Federico II" University of Naples, Naples, Italy
- 116 Luigi Angrisani Department of Public Health, "Federico II" University of Naples, Naples, Italy
- 117 Paola Iovino Department of Public Health, "Federico II" University of Naples, Naples, Italy
- 118 Rossella Palma Department of Public Health, "Federico II" University of Naples, Naples, Italy
- 119 Angelo Iossa Division of General Surgery & Bariatric Center of Excellence IFSO-EC, University La Sapienza of Rome, Italy
- 120 Cristian Eugeniu Boru Division of General Surgery & Bariatric Center of Excellence IFSO-EC, University La Sapienza of Rome, Italy
- 121 Francesco De Angelis Division of General Surgery & Bariatric Center of Excellence IFSO-EC, University La Sapienza of Rome, Italy
- 122 Gianfranco Silecchia Division of General Surgery & Bariatric Center of Excellence IFSO-EC, University La Sapienza of Rome, Italy
- 123 Abdulzahra Hussain Doncaster and Bassetlaw Teaching Hospitals
- 124 Srivinasan Balchandra Doncaster and Bassetlaw Teaching Hospitals
- 125 Izaskun Balciscueta Coltell Dr. Lorenzo, Innovación Cirugía Obesidad y Diabetes
- 126 Javier Lorenzo Pérez Dr. Lorenzo, Innovación Cirugía Obesidad y Diabetes
- 127 Ashok Bohra East-Midlands Bariatric & Metabolic Institute (EMBMI), Royal Derby Hospital, Derby, UK
- 128 Altaf K Awan East-Midlands Bariatric & Metabolic Institute (EMBMI), Royal Derby Hospital, Derby, UK
- 129 Brijesh Madhok East-Midlands Bariatric & Metabolic Institute (EMBMI), Royal Derby Hospital, Derby, UK
- 130 Paul C Leeder East-Midlands Bariatric & Metabolic Institute (EMBMI), Royal Derby Hospital, Derby, UK
- 131 herif Awad East-Midlands Bariatric & Metabolic Institute (EMBMI), Royal Derby Hospital, Derby, UK
- 132 Waleed Al-Khyatt East-Midlands Bariatric & Metabolic Institute (EMBMI), Royal Derby Hospital, Derby, UK
- 133 Ashraf Shoma Elsafa Private Hospital & Mansoura University Hospital & Eldelta Hospital
- 134 Hosam Elghadban Elsafa Private Hospital & Mansoura University Hospital & Eldelta Hospital
- 135 Sameh Ghareeb Elsafa Private Hospital & Mansoura University Hospital & Eldelta Hospital
- 136 Bryan Mathews ew York Minimally Invasive Surgery PLLC, New York, NY , USA

- 137 Marina Kurian ew York Minimally Invasive Surgery PLLC, New York, NY , USA
- 138 Andreas Larentzakis First Department of Propaedeutic Surgery, Hippocraton General Athens Hospital, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece
- 139 Gaviella Zoi Vrakopoulou First Department of Propaedeutic Surgery, Hippocraton General Athens Hospital, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece
- 140 Konstantinos Albanopoulos First Department of Propaedeutic Surgery, Hippocraton General Athens Hospital, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece
- 141 Ahemt Bozdog Firat University Hospital, Elazığ. Turkey
- 142 Azmi Lale Firat University Hospital, Elazığ. Turkey
- 143 Cuneyt Kirkil Firat University Hospital, Elazığ. Turkey
- 144 Mursid Dincer Firat University Hospital, Elazığ. Turkey
- 145 Ahmad Bashir Gastrointestinal, Bariatric & Metabolic Center at Jordan Hospital, Amman, Jordan
- 146 Ashraf Haddad Gastrointestinal, Bariatric & Metabolic Center at Jordan Hospital, Amman, Jordan
- 147 Leen Abu Hijleh Gastrointestinal, Bariatric & Metabolic Center at Jordan Hospital, Amman, Jordan
- 148 Bruno Zilberstein GASTROMED-Zilberstein Institute, Sao Paulo, Brazil
- 149 Danilo Dallago de Marchi GASTROMED-Zilberstein Institute, Sao Paulo, Brazil
- 150 Willy Petrini Souza GASTROMED-Zilberstein Institute, Sao Paulo, Brazil
- 151 Carl Magnus Brodén GB Obesitas Skaane, Malmö. Sweden.
- 152 Hjörtur Gislason GB Obesitas Skaane, Malmö. Sweden.
- 153 Kamran Shah GB Obesitas Skaane, Malmö. Sweden.
- 154 Antonio Ambrosi General Surgery, University of Foggia. Italy.
- 155 Giovanna Pavone General Surgery, University of Foggia. Italy.
- 156 Nicola Tartaglia General Surgery, University of Foggia. Italy.
- 157 S Lakshmi Kumari Kona Glenagles Global Hospital, Lakdikapul, Hyderabad
- 158 Kalyan K Glenagles Global Hospital, Lakdikapul, Hyderabad
- 159 Cesar Ernesto Guevara Perez Grammo SAS IPS, Bogotá, Colombia
- 160 Miguel Alberto Forero Botero Grammo SAS IPS, Bogotá, Colombia
- 161 Adrian Covic Grigore T. Popa University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Iasi, Romania
- 162 Daniel Timofte Grigore T. Popa University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Iasi, Romania
- 163 Madalina Maxim Grigore T. Popa University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Iasi, Romania
- 164 Dashti Faraj Groene Hart Hospital in Gouda & Dutch Obesity Clinic The Hague, Netherlands
- 165 Larissa Tseng Groene Hart Hospital in Gouda & Dutch Obesity Clinic The Hague, Netherlands
- 166 Ronald Liem Groene Hart Hospital in Gouda & Dutch Obesity Clinic The Hague, Netherlands
- 167 Gürdal Ören Gürdal Ören Bariatric Surgery Center, İstanbul, Turkey
- 168 Evren Dilektasli Hayat Hospital, General Surgery, Bariatric & Metabolic Surgery , Bursa , Turkey
- 169 Ilker Yalcin Hayat Hospital, General Surgery, Bariatric & Metabolic Surgery , Bursa , Turkey
- 170 Hudhaifa AlMukhtar Healthpoint Hospital, Abu Dhabi, UAE
- 171 Mohammed Al Hadad Healthpoint Hospital, Abu Dhabi, UAE
- 172 Rasmi Mohan Healthpoint Hospital, Abu Dhabi, UAE
- 173 Naresh Arora HOPE OBESITY CENTRE, AHMEDABAD, INDIA
- 174 Digvijaysingh Bedi HOPE OBESITY CENTRE, AHMEDABAD, INDIA
- 175 Claire Rives-Lange Hôpital Européen Georges Pompidou, AP-HP, Université de Paris, Paris, France
- 176 Jean-Marc Chevallier Hôpital Européen Georges Pompidou, AP-HP, Université de Paris, Paris, France
- 177 Tigran Poghosyan Hôpital Européen Georges Pompidou, AP-HP, Université de Paris, Paris, France
- 178 Hugues Sebbag Hôpital Privé de Provence (HPP), Aix-en-Provence, France
- 179 Lamia Zinaï Hôpital Privé de Provence (HPP), Aix-en-Provence, France
- 180 Saadi Khaldi Hôpital Privé de Provence (HPP), Aix-en-Provence, France
- 181 Charles Mauchien Hôpital Ste Musse Centre Hospitalier Toulon
- 182 Davide Mazza Hôpital Ste Musse Centre Hospitalier Toulon
- 183 Georgiana Dinescu Hôpital Ste Musse Centre Hospitalier Toulon
- 184 Bernardo Rea Hospital Ángeles Lomas, Estado de México, México
- 185 Fernando Pérez-Galaz Hospital Ángeles Lomas, Estado de México, México
- 186 Luis Zavala Hospital Christus Muguerza Sur - Monterrey México
- 187 Anais Besa Hospital Clínic de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain
- 188 Anna Curell Hospital Clínic de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain
- 189 Jose M Balibrea Hospital Clínic de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain
- 190 Carlos Vaz Hospital CUF Tejo, Lisbon, Portugal
- 191 Luis Galindo Hospital CUF Tejo, Lisbon, Portugal
- 192 Nelson Silva Hospital CUF Tejo, Lisbon, Portugal
- 193 José Luis Estrada Caballero Hospital General Universitario Alicante Spain
- 194 Sergio Ortiz Sebastian Hospital General Universitario Alicante Spain
- 195 João Caetano Dallegrave Marchesini Hospital Marcelino Champagnat, Curitiba, Brazil
- 196 Ricardo Arcanjo da Fonseca Pereira Hospital Marcelino Champagnat, Curitiba, Brazil
- 197 Wagner Herbert Sobottka Hospital Marcelino Champagnat, Curitiba, Brazil
- 198 Felipe Eduardo Fiolo Hospital Privado de Comunidad - Mar del Plata - Argentina
- 199 Matias Turchi Hospital Privado de Comunidad - Mar del Plata - Argentina
- 200 Antonio Claudio Jamel Coelho Hospital Rios D'Or , Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- 201 Andre Luis Zacaron Hospital Rios D'Or , Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- 202 André Barbosa Hospital Unimed Natal, Natal, Brazil
- 203 Reynaldo Quinino Hospital Unimed Natal, Natal, Brazil
- 204 Gabriel Menaldi Hospital Universitario Austral, Bariatric and Metabolic department. Buenos Aires Argentina
- 205 Nicolás Paleari Hospital Universitario Austral, Bariatric and Metabolic department. Buenos Aires Argentina
- 206 Pedro Martinez-Duarte Hospital Universitario Austral, Bariatric and Metabolic department. Buenos Aires Argentina
- 207 Gabriel Martínez de Aragon Ramírez de Esparza Hospital Universitario de Álava, Vitoria- Gasteiz. Spain
- 208 Valentin Sierra Esteban Hospital Universitario de Álava, Vitoria- Gasteiz. Spain
- 209 Antonio Torres Hospital Universitario Madrid Montepincipe. Hospital Clinico San Carlos. Madrid
- 210 Jose Luis Garcia-Galocha Hospital Universitario Madrid Montepincipe. Hospital Clinico San Carlos. Madrid
- 211 Miguel Josa Hospital Universitario Madrid Montepincipe. Hospital Clinico San Carlos. Madrid
- 212 Jose Manuel Pacheco-Garcia Hospital Universitario Puerta del Mar. Cadiz. Spain

- 213 Maria Angeles Mayo-Ossorio Hospital Universitario Puerta del Mar. Cadiz. Spain
- 214 Pradeep Chowbey Institute of Minimal Access, Metabolic & Bariatric Surgery, Max Super-Speciality Hospital, Saket, New Delhi, India
- 215 Vandana Soni Institute of Minimal Access, Metabolic & Bariatric Surgery, Max Super-Speciality Hospital, Saket, New Delhi, India
- 216 Hercio Azevedo de Vasconcelos Cunha Instituto Campineiro de Tratamento da Obesidade, Campinas, Brazil
- 217 Michel Victor Castilho Instituto Campineiro de Tratamento da Obesidade, Campinas, Brazil
- 218 Rafael Meneguzzi Alves Ferreira Instituto Campineiro de Tratamento da Obesidade, Campinas, Brazil
- 219 Thiago Alvim Barreiro Instituto Campineiro de Tratamento da Obesidade, Campinas, Brazil
- 220 Alexandros Charalabopoulos Interbalcan Medical Center
- 221 Elias Sdralis Interbalcan Medical Center
- 222 Spyridon Davakis Interbalcan Medical Center
- 223 Benoit Bomans International School Reduced Scar Laparoscopy, Brussels, Belgium
- 224 Giovanni Dapri International School Reduced Scar Laparoscopy, Brussels, Belgium
- 225 Koenraad Van Belle International School Reduced Scar Laparoscopy, Brussels, Belgium
- 226 MazenTakieddine Isppc chu -André Vésale , metabolic & Bariatric surgery
- 227 Pol Vaneukem Isppc chu -André Vésale , metabolic & Bariatric surgery
- 228 Esma Seda Akalın Karaca İstanbul Bilgi University,Turkey,(first author), Department of Pulmonary Medicine, Istanbul Yedikule Chest Diseases and Thoracic Surgery Education and Research Hospital, Zeytinburnu, Turkey(for second author)
- 229 Fatih Can Karaca İstanbul Bilgi University,Turkey,(first author), Department of Pulmonary Medicine, Istanbul Yedikule Chest Diseases and Thoracic Surgery Education and Research Hospital, Zeytinburnu, Turkey(for second author)
- 230 Aziz Sumer Istinye University, School of Medicine, Istanbul,Turkey
- 231 Caghan Peksen Istinye University, School of Medicine, Istanbul,Turkey
- 232 Osman Anil Savas Istinye University, School of Medicine, Istanbul,Turkey
- 233 Elias Chousleb Jackson North Medical Center, Miami Fl
- 234 fahad Elmokayed king Abdul aziz hospital, Alhasa,saudi arabia
- 235 islam fakhereldin king Abdul aziz hospital, Alhasa,saudi arabia
- 236 Hany Mohamed Aboshanab king Abdul aziz hospital, Alhasa,saudi arabia
- 237 Talal swelium king Abdul aziz hospital, Alhasa,saudi arabia
- 238 Ahmad Gudal King Abdullah Medical Complex, Jeddah, KSA
- 239 Lamees Gamloo King Abdullah Medical Complex, Jeddah, KSA
- 240 Ayushka Ugale Kirloskar Hospital, Hyderabad, India
- 241 Surendra Ugale Kirloskar Hospital, Hyderabad, India
- 242 Clara Boeker Klinikum Region Hannover- Klinikum Nordstadt
- 243 Christian Reetz Klinikum Region Hannover- Klinikum Nordstadt
- 244 Ibrahim Ali Hakami Klinikum Region Hannover- Klinikum Nordstadt
- 245 Julian Mall Klinikum Region Hannover- Klinikum Nordstadt
- 246 Andreas Alexandrou Laiko General Hospital, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece
- 247 Efstratia Baili Laiko General Hospital, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece
- 248 Zsolt Bodnar Letterkenny University Hospital, Letterkenny, Ireland
- 249 Almantas Maleckas Lithuanian University of Health Sciences, Surgery Department, Kaunas, Lithuania
- 250 Rita Gudaityte Lithuanian University of Health Sciences, Surgery Department, Kaunas, Lithuania
- 251 Cem Emir Guldogan Liv Hospital Ankara, Turkey
- 252 Emre Gundogdu Liv Hospital Ankara, Turkey
- 253 Mehmet Mahir Ozmen Liv Hospital Ankara, Turkey (Istinye University School of Medicine)
- 254 Deepti Thakkar Livlife Hospitals, Hyderabad, India
- 255 Nandakishore Dukkupati Livlife Hospitals, Hyderabad, India
- 256 Poonam Shashank Shah LOC Healthcare LLP, Pune, India
- 257 Shashank Subhashchandra Shah LOC Healthcare LLP, Pune, India
- 258 Simran Shashank Shah LOC Healthcare LLP, Pune, India
- 259 Md Tanveer Adil Luton and Dunstable Hospital
- 260 Periyathambi Jambulingam Luton and Dunstable Hospital
- 261 Ravikrishna Mamidanna Luton and Dunstable Hospital
- 262 Douglas Whitelaw Luton and Dunstable University Hospital
- 263 Md Tanveer Adil Luton and Dunstable University Hospital
- 264 Vigyan Jain Luton and Dunstable University Hospital
- 265 Deepa Kizhakke Veetil Manipal Hospital, New Delhi, India
- 266 Randeep Wadhawan Manipal Hospital, New Delhi, India
- 267 Antonio Torres Max Medical, centro de cirugía bariátrica/ robótica, Hospital Metropolitano de Quito/Ecuador
- 268 Max Torres Max Medical, centro de cirugía bariátrica/robótica, Hospital Metropolitano de Quito/Ecuador
- 269 Tabata Tinoco Max Medical, centro de cirugía bariátrica/ robótica, Hospital Metropolitano de Quito/Ecuador
- 270 Wouter Leclercq Máxima Medical Center, Veldhoven, The Netherlands
- 271 Marleen Romeijn Máxima Medical Center, Veldhoven, The Netherlands
- 272 Kelly van de Pas Máxima Medical Center, Veldhoven, The Netherlands
- 273 Ali K. Alkhazraji Mediclinic Hospital Airport Road, Abu Dhabi, UAE.
- 274 Safwan A. Taha Mediclinic Hospital Airport Road, Abu Dhabi, UAE.
- 275 Murat Ustun Memorial Hospital, Istanbul, Turkey
- 276 Taner Yigit Memorial Hospital, Istanbul, Turkey
- 277 Aatif Inam Metabolic, Thoracic & General Surgery Team III, Department of General Surgery , Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS), Islamabad, Pakistan.
- 278 Muhammad Burhanulhaq Metabolic, Thoracic & General Surgery Team III, Department of General Surgery , Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS), Islamabad, Pakistan.
- 279 Abdolreza Pazouki Minimally Invasive Surgery Research Center, Division of Minimally invasive and Bariatric surgery, Department of Surgery, Rasool-e Akram Hospital, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran
- 280 Foolad Eghbali Minimally Invasive Surgery Research Center, Division of Minimally invasive and Bariatric surgery, Department of Surgery, Rasool-e Akram Hospital, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran
- 281 Mohammad Kermansaravi Minimally Invasive Surgery Research Center, Division of Minimally invasive and Bariatric surgery, Department of Surgery, Rasool-e Akram Hospital, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran
- 282 Amir Hosein Davarpanah Jazi Minimally Invasive Surgery Research Center, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, Isfahan, Iran
- 283 Mohsen Mahmoudieh Minimally Invasive Surgery Research Center, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, Isfahan, Iran
- 284 Neda Mogharehabed Minimally Invasive Surgery Research Center, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, Isfahan, Iran
- 285 Gregory Tsiotos MITERA Hospital, Athens, Greece
- 286 Konstantinos Stamou MITERA Hospital, Athens, Greece

- 287 Francisco J. Barrera Rodriguez Monterrey Gastro & Bariatric Group, Monterrey Mexico
- 288 Marco A. Rojas Navarro Monterrey Gastro & Bariatric Group, Monterrey Mexico
- 289 Omar MOhamed Torres Monterrey Gastro & Bariatric Group, Monterrey Mexico
- 290 Sergio Lopez Martinez Monterrey Gastro & Bariatric Group, Monterrey Mexico
- 291 Elda Rocio Maltos Tamez MtyBariatrics, Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Mexico
- 292 Gustavo A. Millan Cornejo MtyBariatrics, Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Mexico
- 293 Jose Eduardo Garcia Flores MtyBariatrics, Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Mexico
- 294 Diya Aldeen Mohammed Najjar Hospital, Beirut, Lebanon
- 295 Mohamad Hayssam Elfawal Najjar Hospital, Beirut, Lebanon
- 296 Asim Shabbir National University Hospital Singapore
- 297 Kim Guowei National University Hospital Singapore
- 298 Jimmy BY So National University Hospital Singapore
- 299 Elif Tuğçe Kaplan NCR International Hospital, Gaziantep, Turkey
- 300 Mehmet Kaplan NCR International Hospital, Gaziantep, Turkey
- 301 Tuğba Kaplan NCR International Hospital, Gaziantep, Turkey
- 302 DangTuan Pham Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center, Niagara Falls, NY, USA
- 303 Gurteshwar Rana Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center, Niagara Falls, NY, USA
- 304 Mojdeh Kappus Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center, Niagara Falls, NY, USA
- 305 Riddish Gadani NOBESITY BARIATRIC CENTRE, K D HOSPITAL, AHMEDABAD, INDIA
- 306 Manish Kahitan NOBESITY BARIATRIC CENTRE, K D HOSPITAL, AHMEDABAD, INDIA
- 307 Koshish Pokharel NOBESITY BARIATRIC CENTRE, K D HOSPITAL, AHMEDABAD, INDIA
- 308 Alan Osborne North Bristol NHS Trust
- 309 Dimitri Pournaras North Bristol NHS Trust
- 310 James Hewes North Bristol NHS Trust
- 311 Errichetta Napolitano Obesity and Metabolic Surgery Unit, Ospedale Evangelico Betania, Naples, Italy
- 312 Sonja Chiappetta Obesity and Metabolic Surgery Unit, Ospedale Evangelico Betania, Naples, Italy
- 313 Vincenzo Bottino Obesity and Metabolic Surgery Unit, Ospedale Evangelico Betania, Naples, Italy
- 314 evelyn dorado obesity and sthetic surgery clinic clinica med cali colombia
- 315 Axel Schoettler Obesity Center, Municipal Hospital Karlsruhe, Germany
- 316 Daniel Gaertner Obesity Center, Municipal Hospital Karlsruhe, Germany
- 317 Katharina Fedtke Obesity Center, Municipal Hospital Karlsruhe, Germany
- 318 Francisco Aguilar-Espinosa Obesity Clinic: Los Altos Obesity Surgery, Tepatitlan, Mexico
- 319 Saul Aceves-Lozano Obesity Clinic: Los Altos Obesity Surgery, Tepatitlan, Mexico
- 320 Alessandro Balani Ospedale di Gorizia, Italy. Struttura Complessa Chirurgia Generale
- 321 Carlo Nagliati Ospedale di Gorizia, Italy. Struttura Complessa Chirurgia Generale
- 322 Damiano Pennisi Ospedale di Gorizia, Italy. Struttura Complessa Chirurgia Generale
- 323 Andrea Rizzi Ospedale Galmarini Tradate, Varese, Italy
- 324 Francesco Frattini Ospedale Galmarini Tradate, Varese, Italy
- 325 Diego Foschi Ospedale San Giuseppe IRCCS Multimedica, University of Milan, Milan, Italy
- 326 Laura Benuzzi Ospedale San Giuseppe IRCCS Multimedica, University of Milan, Milan, Italy
- 327 CHIRAG PARIKH PARUL INSTITUTE OF MEDICAL SCIENCES & RESEARCH, PARUL UIVERSITY, WAGHODIA, VADODARA, INDIA
- 328 HARSHIL SHAH PARUL INSTITUTE OF MEDICAL SCIENCES & RESEARCH, PARUL UIVERSITY, WAGHODIA, VADODARA, INDIA
- 329 Enrico Pinotti Policlinico San Pietro, Bergamo, Italy, Unitá di Chirurgia Bariatrica
- 330 Mauro Montuori Policlinico San Pietro, Bergamo, Italy, Unitá di Chirurgia Bariatrica
- 331 Vincenzo Borrelli Policlinico San Pietro, Bergamo, Italy, Unitá di Chirurgia Bariatrica
- 332 Jerome Dargent Polyclinique Lyon-Nord, 69140 Rillieux, France
- 333 Catalin A COPAESCU PONDERAS ACADEMIC HOSPITAL, Bucharest, ROMANIA
- 334 Ionut HUTOPILA PONDERAS ACADEMIC HOSPITAL, Bucharest, ROMANIA
- 335 Bogdan SMEU PONDERAS ACADEMIC HOSPITAL, Bucharest, ROMANIA
- 336 Bart Witteman Rijnstate Hospital/Vitalys Clinics, Arnhem, the Netherlands
- 337 Eric Hazebroek Rijnstate Hospital/Vitalys Clinics, Arnhem, the Netherlands
- 338 Laura Deden Rijnstate Hospital/Vitalys Clinics, Arnhem, the Netherlands
- 339 Laura Heusschen Rijnstate Hospital/Vitalys Clinics, Arnhem, the Netherlands
- 340 Sietske Okkema Rijnstate Hospital/Vitalys Clinics, Arnhem, the Netherlands
- 341 Theo Aufenacker Rijnstate Hospital/Vitalys Clinics, Arnhem, the Netherlands
- 342 Willem den Hengst Rijnstate Hospital/Vitalys Clinics, Arnhem, the Netherlands
- 343 Wouter Vening Rijnstate Hospital/Vitalys Clinics, Arnhem, the Netherlands
- 344 Yonta van der Burgh Rijnstate Hospital/Vitalys Clinics, Arnhem, the Netherlands
- 345 Ahmad Ghazal Saint Louis Hospital - Aleppo, Syria
- 346 Hamza Ibrahim Saint Louis Hospital - Aleppo, Syria
- 347 Mourad Niazi Saint Louis Hospital - Aleppo, Syria
- 348 Bilal Alkhaffaf Salford Royal NHS Foundation Trust
- 349 Mohammad Altarawni Salford Royal NHS Foundation Trust
- 350 Giovanni Carlo Cesana San Marco Hospital GSD, Zingonia (BG), Italy
- 351 Marco Anselmino San Marco Hospital GSD, Zingonia (BG), Italy
- 352 Matteo Uccelli San Marco Hospital GSD, Zingonia (BG), Italy
- 353 Stefano Olmi San Marco Hospital GSD, Zingonia (BG), Italy
- 354 Christine Stier Sana Obesity Center Northrhine Westphalia, Clinic for General, Visceral, and Transplantation Surgery,
- 355 Tahsin Akmanlar Sana Obesity Center Northrhine Westphalia, Clinic for General, Visceral, and Transplantation Surgery,
- 356 Thomas Sonnenberg Sana Obesity Center Northrhine Westphalia
- 357 Uwe Schieferbein Sana Obesity Center Northrhine Westphalia
- 358 Alejandro Marcolini Sanatorio Britanico de Rosario, Rosario, Santa Fe, Argentina
- 359 Diego Awruch Sanatorio Britanico de Rosario, Rosario, Santa Fe, Argentina
- 360 Marco Vicentin Sanatorio Britanico de Rosario, Rosario, Santa Fe, Argentina

- 361 Eduardo Lemos de Souza Bastos Santa Casa de Marilia, Marilia, Brazil
- 362 Samuel Azenha Gregorio Santa Casa de Marilia, Marilia, Brazil
- 363 Anmol ahuja sir ganga ram hospital delhi india
- 364 Tarun mittal sir ganga ram hospital delhi india
- 365 Roel Bolckmans Somerset NHS Foundation Trust
- 366 Tom Wiggins Somerset NHS Foundation Trust
- 367 Clément Baratte Sorbonne Université, Institute of Cardiometabolism and Nutrition ICAN, Assistance Publique-Hôpitaux de Paris, Departments of Digestive surgery and Nutrition, Pitié-Salpêtrière University Hospital, Paris, France.
- 368 Judith Aron Wisniewsky Sorbonne Université, Institute of Cardiometabolism and Nutrition ICAN, Assistance Publique-Hôpitaux de Paris, Departments of Digestive surgery and Nutrition, Pitié-Salpêtrière University Hospital, Paris, France.
- 369 Laurent Genser Sorbonne Université, Institute of Cardiometabolism and Nutrition ICAN, Assistance Publique-Hôpitaux de Paris, Departments of Digestive surgery and Nutrition, Pitié-Salpêtrière University Hospital, Paris, France.
- 370 Lynn Chong St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne
- 371 Lillian Taylor St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne
- 372 Salena Ward St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne
- 373 Lynn Chong St Vincent's Hospital, Melbourne, Australia
- 374 Lillian Taylor St Vincent's Hospital, Melbourne, Australia
- 375 Michael W Hi St Vincent's Hospital, Melbourne, Australia
- 376 Helen Heneghan St Vincent's University Hospital, Dublin, Ireland
- 377 Naomi Fearon St Vincent's University Hospital, Dublin, Ireland
- 378 Andreas Plamper St. Franziskus Hospital, Cologne, Germany
- 379 Karl Rheinwald St. Franziskus Hospital, Cologne, Germany
- 380 Helen Heneghan St. Vincent's University Hospital, Dublin, Ireland
- 381 Justin Geoghegan St. Vincent's University Hospital, Dublin, Ireland
- 382 Kin Cheung Ng St. Vincent's University Hospital, Dublin, Ireland
- 383 Naomi Fearon St. Vincent's University Hospital, Dublin, Ireland
- 384 Krzysztof Kaseja State Clinical Hospital No 2 of the Pomeranian Medical University in Szczecin, Poland
- 385 Maciej Kotowski State Clinical Hospital No 2 of the Pomeranian Medical University in Szczecin, Poland
- 386 Tarig A Samarkandy Sutter Gould Medical Foundation, Dameron Hospital - Ca, USA
- 387 Adolfo Leyva-Alvizo Tecnológico de Monterrey, Monterrey, MX
- 388 Lourdes Corzo-Culebro Tecnológico de Monterrey, Monterrey, MX
- 389 Cunchuan Wang The First Affiliated Hospital of Jinan University, Guangzhou, China
- 390 Wah Yang The First Affiliated Hospital of Jinan University, Guangzhou, China
- 391 Zhiyong Dong The First Affiliated Hospital of Jinan University, Guangzhou, China
- 392 Manel Riera The Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital, Shrewsbury, UK
- 393 Rajesh Jain The Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital, Shrewsbury, UK
- 394 Hosam Hamed Truelife bariatric and digestive surgery center, Mansoura, Dakahleyya, Egypt
- 395 Truelife bariatric and digestive surgery center, Mansoura, Dakahleyya, Egypt
- 396 Katia Zarzar Tu Opcion Bariátrica
- 397 Manuel Garcia Tu Opcion Bariátrica
- 398 Ahmet Gökhan Türkçapar Türkçapar Bariatrics Obesity Center, İstanbul, Turkey
- 399 Ozan Şen Türkçapar Bariatrics Obesity Center, İstanbul, Turkey
- 400 Edoardo Baldini U.O. Chirurgia, Ospedale "Guglielmo da Saliceto", Piacenza, Italy
- 401 Luigi Conti U.O. Chirurgia, Ospedale "Guglielmo da Saliceto", Piacenza, Italy
- 402 Cacio Wietzycoski Unimed Vale do Caí Hospital, Montenegro, BR. Maicé Hospital, Caçador, BR
- 403 Eduardo Lopes Unimed Vale do Caí Hospital, Montenegro, BR. Maicé Hospital, Caçador, BR
- 404 Tadeja Pintar University Medical Center Ljubljana, Slovenia
- 405 Jure Salobir University Medical Center Ljubljana, Slovenia
- 406 Cengiz Aydin University of Health Sciences Tepecik Training and Research Hospital, Department of General Surgery, Izmir, Turkey
- 407 Semra Demirli Atici University of Health Sciences Tepecik Training and Research Hospital, Department of General Surgery, Izmir, Turkey
- 408 Anil Ergin University of Health Sciences, Fatih Sultan Mehmet Training and Research Hospital, General Surgery Department, İstanbul, Turkey
- 409 Huseyin Ciyiltepe University of Health Sciences, Fatih Sultan Mehmet Training and Research Hospital, General Surgery Department, İstanbul, Turkey
- 410 Mehmet Abdussamet Bozkurt University of Health Sciences, Kanuni Sultan Süleyman Training and Research Hospital, İstanbul, Turkey
- 411 Mehmet Celal Kizilkaya University of Health Sciences, Kanuni Sultan Süleyman Training and Research Hospital, İstanbul, Turkey
- 412 Nezihe Berrin Dodur Onalan University of Health Sciences, Kanuni Sultan Süleyman Training and Research Hospital, İstanbul, Turkey
- 413 Mariana Nabila Binti Ahmad Zuber University of Malaya Medical Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 414 Wei Jin Wong University of Malaya Medical Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 415 Amador Garcia Vall d'Hebron University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain
- 416 Laura Vidal Vall d'Hebron University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain
- 417 Marc Beisani Vall d'Hebron University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain
- 418 Jorge Pasquier Vall Hebron Hospital Campus - Hospital de Barcelonaa-SCIAS
- 419 Ramon Vilallonga Vall Hebron Hospital Campus - Hospital de Barcelonaa-SCIAS
- 420 Sharad Sharma Vinamra Swaraj Hospital, Navi Mumbai, India
- 421 Chetan Parmar Whittington Health NHS Trust, London, United Kingdom
- 422 Lyndcie Lee Whittington Health NHS Trust, London, United Kingdom
- 423 Pratik Sufi Whittington Health NHS Trust, London, United Kingdom
- 424 Hüseyin Sinan www.metabolistsurgery.com İstanbul Turkey
- 425 Mehmet Saydam www.metabolistsurgery.com İstanbul Turkey

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Data Statement The data used to support the findings of this study can be released upon request.

Declarations

Ethics Approval This project was registered as a multinational audit (number: 5197) at the University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust, UK. Each site project lead was responsible for obtaining local governance approvals and data sharing agreements before entering data into the registry.

Consent to Participate No informed consent was needed for an audit of this nature.

Conflict of Interest KM has been paid honoraria by various NHS trusts and Ethicon®, Medtronic®, Gore Inc®, and Olympus® for educational activities related to bariatric surgery. Other authors have no conflicts of interest.

Statement of Human and Animal Rights Not Applicable


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Authors and Affiliations

Rishi Singhal^{1,2}  · Islam Omar³ · Brijesh Madhok⁴ · Yashasvi Rajeev⁵ · Yitka Graham^{6,7} · Abd A. Tahrani^{8,9,10} · Christian Ludwig¹¹ · Tom Wiggins¹ · Kamal Mahawar^{6,12} · On behalf of the GENEVA Collaborators

¹ Upper GI unit, Birmingham Heartlands Hospital, University Hospital Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust, Bordesley Green East, Birmingham, West Midlands B9 5SS, UK

² Healthier Weight, Birmingham, UK

³ General Surgery Department, Wirral University Teaching Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, North West, Wirral, UK

⁴ Upper GI unit, University Hospital of Derby and Burton NHS Foundation Trust, East Midlands, Derby, UK

⁵ Pediatric Accidents and Emergencies Department, London Northwest University Healthcare NHS Trust, London, UK

⁶ Faculty of Health Sciences and Wellbeing, University of Sunderland, North East, Sunderland, UK

⁷ Facultad de Pyscologia, Universidad Anahuac, Anahuac, Naucalpan de Juárez, Mexico

⁸ Institute of Metabolism and Systems Research, College of Medical and Dental Sciences, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

⁹ Centre for Endocrinology, Diabetes, and Metabolism, Birmingham Health Partners, Birmingham, UK

¹⁰ Department of Diabetes and Endocrinology, University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust, Birmingham, West Midlands, UK

¹¹ Institute of Metabolism and Systems Research, College of Medical and Dental Sciences, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, West Midlands, UK

¹² Bariatric Unit, South Tyneside and Sunderland NHS Foundation Trust, North East, Sunderland, UK