The association of fatigue, comorbidity burden, disability and gross domestic product in patients with rheumatoid arthritis. Results from 34 countries participating in the QUEST-RA programme


1Copenhagen Center for Arthritis Research, Center for Rheumatology and Spine Diseases, Glostrup Hospital, Glostrup, Denmark; 2University of Copenhagen, Dept. of Clinical Medicine, Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, Copenhagen, Denmark; 3Mayo Clinic Health System, Eau Claire, WI, USA; 4University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences and Central Arkansas Veterans Health Care System, Little Rock, AR, USA; 5University Medical Center Utrecht, Utrecht, the Netherlands; 6Dept. of Medical Sciences, Uppsala University, Uppsala Sweden; 7University of Twente, the Netherlands; 8Lahtii Central Hospital, Lahti, Finland; 9National Yang-Ming University, Taipei, Taiwan; 10Hospital Universitario de Brasilia, Brazil; 11Dept. of Immunology, Lucknow, India; 12Institute of Rheumatology, Tokyo Women’s Medical University, Japan; 13Humeira Badsha Medical Center, Arab Emirates; 14UPMC Univ Paris 06, GRC-UPMC 08 (EEMOIS); AP-HP, Pitié Salpêtrière Hospital, Dept. of Rheumatology, Paris, France; 15University of Genova, Genova, Italy; 16Catholic University of Sacred Heart, Rome, Italy; 17Seoul National University College of Medicine, Seoul, South Korea; 18Dept. of Rheumatology, Marmara University, Istanbul, Turkey; 19Kennedy Institute of Rheumatology, University of Oxford, UK; 20Sint Franciscus Gasthuis, Rotterdam, the Netherlands; 21Schloßpark Klinik, University Medicine, Berlin; 22Kenyatta National Hospital, University of Nairobi, Kenya; 23State Research Institute for Innovative Medicine, Lithuania; 24Vilnius University Medical Faculty, Lithuania; 25Dept. of Internal Medicine, University of Ioannina, Greece; 26Ramos Mejía Hospital, Buenos Aires, Argentina; 27Gr. T. Popa University of Medicine and Pharmacy Iasi, Iasi, Romania; 28Alhiraar Clinic, Dubai, United Arab Emirates; 29Taylor Hospital, Ridley Park, PA, USA; 30Dept. of Rheumatology and Clinical Immunology, Berlin, Germany; 31Assuit University, Egypt; 32Rheumatology Clinic, Pristina, Kosovo; 33Jyväskylä Central Hospital, Jyväskylä; Medcare Oy, Äänekoski, Finland.

Abstract

Objective

The aim is to assess the prevalence of comorbidities and to further analyse to which degree fatigue can be explained by comorbidity burden, disease activity, disability and gross domestic product (GDP) in patients with rheumatoid arthritis (RA).

Methods

Nine thousands eight hundred seventy-four patients from 34 countries, 16 with high GDP (>24,000 US dollars [USD] per capita) and 18 low-GDP countries (<24,000 USD) participated in the Quantitative Standard monitoring of Patients with RA (QUEST-RA) study. The prevalence of 31 comorbid conditions, fatigue (0–10 cm visual analogue scale [VAS] [10=worst]), disease activity in 28 joints (DAS28), and physical disability (Health Assessment Questionnaire score [HAQ]) were assessed. Univariate and multivariate linear regression analyses were performed to assess the association between fatigue and comorbidities, disease activity, disability and GDP.

Results

Overall, patients reported a median of 2 comorbid conditions of which hypertension (31.5%), osteoporosis (17.6%), osteoarthritis (15.5%) and hyperlipidaemia (14.2%) were the most prevalent. The majority of comorbidities were more common in high-GDP countries. The median fatigue score was 4.4 (4.8 in low-GDP countries and 3.8 in high-GDP countries, p<0.001). In low-GDP countries 25.4% of the patients had a high level of fatigue (>6.6) compared with 23.0% in high-GDP countries (p<0.001). In univariate analysis, fatigue increased with increasing number of comorbidities, disease activity and disability in both high- and low-GDP countries. In multivariate analysis of all countries, these 3 variables explained 29.4% of the variability, whereas GDP was not significant.

Conclusion

Fatigue is a widespread problem associated with high comorbidity burden, disease activity and disability regardless of GDP.

Key words

QUEST-RA, rheumatoid arthritis, fatigue, comorbidity, disease activity

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Introduction
Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) presents with a multitude of symptoms and challenges for patients and physicians. Unlike normal tiredness, fatigue is chronic, typically not related to overexertion and poorly relieved by rest (1). Persistent fatigue is a major problem for many patients with RA, and fatigue is as severe and frequent as pain (2). Little attention has been paid to its multidimensional nature and its wide-ranging consequences for the patients (3). However, in 2006 the Outcome Measures in Rheumatology Clinical Trials (OMERACT) recommended to include fatigue in the core set of outcome measures for clinical trials (4), thus emphasising its importance. Despite the increasing focus on fatigue, its association with different aspects of the disease (e.g. inflammation, disability, comorbidities) remains poorly understood.

Comorbid medical conditions are common in patients with RA. Some comorbidities are causally associated with RA, while others are related to its treatment (5). Irrespective of their underlying pathogenesis, comorbidities increase disability (6) and shorten life expectancy (7). It is unknown how the comorbid burden is distributed in countries with different economic status, and knowledge on the association between comorbidity burden and fatigue is limited. RA is characterised by inflammation, disability, and joint destruction. Studies suggest that disease activity and disability contribute significantly to fatigue (8). Studies on the association between fatigue and disease activity, functional status and comorbidities, are, however few (9), and it is unknown whether such associations vary across different RA populations.

The Quantitative Standard monitor in patients with RA (QUEST-RA) programme was established in 2005 to promote quantitative assessment in usual care at multiple sites and developing a database of RA patients seen in regular care in several countries. One hundred consecutive non-selected patients at ≥3 sites per country were enrolled (12). By January 2012 the programme included 9,874 patients from 104 sites in 34 countries (Table I). Each included patient was assessed by the SPERA protocol, a standard protocol to evaluate RA, consisting of a four-page patient self-report questionnaire and a three-page clinician assessment. Details of the SPERA protocol and QUEST-RA have been published previously (12, 13).

Ethics committee approvals
The study was conducted according to the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval for the study was obtained from local Internal Review Boards or Ethics Committees according to local requirements.

Study variables
Fatigue, pain and patient’s global assessment of disease activity (PGA) were scored on a 10 cm visual analogue scale (VAS). The phrasing of the fatigue VAS was: “How much of a problem has UNUSUAL fatigue or tiredness been for you OVER THE PAST WEEK?” with the anchors “Fatigue is no problem: 0” and “Fatigue is a major problem: 100”. The highest tertile (>6.6) was chosen arbitrarily to indicate high level of fatigue. The physician completed information concerning 31 comorbidities by interview of patients and review of patients’ files (Table II). Body weight and height were obtained from the patient, and body mass index (BMI) was calculated. Obesity was defined as body mass index (BMI) greater than 30 kg/m².

RA disease activity was measured by Disease Activity Score based on assessment of 28 joints (DAS28). DAS28 trials and associations between fatigue, comorbidities and disease burden in residents with RA and the GDP of their resident country.

Materials and methods
Study population
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RA disease activity was measured by Disease Activity Score based on assessment of 28 joints (DAS28). DAS28

Compeing interests: none declared.
was calculated with 3 variables: number of tender (TJC) and swollen (SJC) joints on examination of 28 joints, and erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR). We used DAS28 without the PTGL because of the latter’s high collinearity with the fatigue score. Disability was assessed by the health assessment questionnaire (HAQ) (14). Standard of living in each country was estimated by the GDP in year 2011 (15) and expressed in US dollars (USD) per capita. Sixteen countries with a GDP per capita equal to or greater than 24,000 USD were classified as “high-GDP” (Canada, Denmark, England, France, Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain Sweden, United Arab Emirates, USA), and 18 countries with a GDP per capita less than 24,000 were classified as “low-GDP” (Argentina, Brazil, Egypt, Estonia, Hungary, India, Kenya, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Morocco, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, South Korea, Taiwan, Turkey) (10).

Statistical methods
Descriptive results are presented as mean with standard deviation (SD) in parentheses, median with Inter Quartile Range (IQR) in parentheses or as percentages. Comparisons between groups were performed using Mann-Whitney U-test for non-parametric continuous variables, t-test for parametric continuous variables and Chi-square test for categorical variables. Analyses were two-sided with a significance level of 0.05. To identify relevant variables for the multivariate analyses, univariate regression analyses with fatigue score as the dependent variable were performed. The following variables were tested: number of comorbidities (0–31), DAS28, HAQ, pain and PTGL. Significant variables were included in a linear multiple regression analysis with backward selection adjusted for age and gender to identify demographic and clinical measures independently associated with fatigue. We chose not to include pain and PTGL in the multiple regression analysis, because both variables have been reported to correlate closely with fatigue. In our dataset Spearman’s rho was 0.596 (p<0.05) for pain and 0.557 (p<0.05) for PTGL. Multiple regression analyses were performed in three groups: the total QUEST-RA population, low-GDP countries and high-GDP countries.

Results
Patients
As of January 1st 2012 the QUEST-RA database included 9,874 patients from 104 sites in 34 countries. The mean age was 54.9 years, 75.8% were woman, and the median disease duration was 8.1 years (Table I). Compared with patients in high-GDP countries, patients in low-GDP countries were younger (52.4 vs. 57.8 years), more were women (76.9% vs. 74.6%), with shorter disease duration (7.9 vs. 8.7 years), and fewer were Caucasians (52.7% vs. 83.6%), Table I.

Fatigue
Overall, the median fatigue score was 4.4, with average score higher in the low-GDP compared to high-GDP countries (4.8 vs. 3.8, p<0.001). In low-GDP countries 25.4% of the patients had a high level of fatigue (>6.6) compared with 23.0% in high-GDP (p<0.001). In the total population 24.4% had a fatigue score >6.6.

Comorbidities
For the distribution of comorbidities see Table II. The most frequent comorbid conditions were hypertension (31.5%), osteoporosis (17.6%), osteoarthritis (15.5%), hyperlipidaemia (14.2%), obesity (14.1%), chronic back pain (13.4%), thyroid disease (10.4%) and peptic ulcer disease (8.5%) (Table II).

Overall, patients had a median of 2 co-morbid conditions and 25.8% had zero comorbidities, 23.1% had 1 comorbidity, 17.9% had 2 comorbidities, 12.6% had 3 comorbidities, 8.0% had 4 comorbidities, 5.2% had 5 comorbidities and 7.4% had between 6 and 17 comorbidities. In high-GDP countries, patients had a median of 2 comorbidities, while patients in low-GDP had 1. Eleven of the comorbidities (angina, coronary artery disease, peptic ulcer, inflammatory bowel disease, impaired renal function, chronic bronchitis, Parkinson’s disease, osteoarthritis, psychiatric disease, AIDS, alcoholism and obesity) were evenly distributed in high- and low-GDP countries. All other comorbidities (17) were more common in high-GDP countries except for chronic back pain, osteoporosis and hypertension, which were more common in the low-GDP countries (Table II).

Disease activity
Patients in low-GDP countries had significantly higher disease activity by both physician-derived measures and patient self-reported scores, in comparison with patients in high-GDP countries (Table I). In high-GDP countries 41.7% of the patients had low disease activity (DAS28<3.2) while only 19.6% of the patients in the low-GDP countries (p<0.001) had low disease activity. A total of 16.9% in high-GDP countries fell in the category of a high DAS28 score (>5.1) compared with 40.2% in low-GDP countries (p<0.001).

Physical function
Overall, patients had a median HAQ score of 0.88. Patients in high-GDP countries scored lower (0.75) compared with patients in low-GDP countries (1.00) (Table I). In high-GDP countries 60.0% of the patients had a HAQ score between 0 and 1. In low-GDP countries it was 46.9% of the patients (p<0.001). A HAQ score between 2 and 3 was found in 7.4% of high-GDP patients and in 12.9% of low-GDP patients (p<0.001).

Fatigue versus comorbidities, disease activity and physical function
Fatigue score increased with increasing number of comorbidities in both high- and low-GDP countries (Fig. 1A). However, patients from low-GDP countries reported more fatigue regardless of the comorbid burden (all p-values<0.05 except for comorbidities=3 and 4, Fig. 1A). In high-GDP countries the median fatigue score increased from 2.8 in patients with no comorbidities to 5.3 in patients with ≥5 comorbidities. In low-GDP countries fatigue score increased from 4 to 6.2. When fatigue was replaced by other patient self-reported variables (i.e. pain and PTGL), a similar pattern was observed. In patients with little pain (<3.33 the lowest tertile), the fatigue score was 2.73.
With increasing disease activity, fatigue score was higher, and there was no difference in fatigue score between patients from high and low GDP countries with similar disease activity. Thus, the median fatigue score was 2.2 in patients with DAS28≤3.2 and 5.8 in patients with DAS28≥5.2, (Fig. 1b). Fatigue score increased with increasing disability (Fig. 1c). There was significant difference in fatigue score between high- and low-GDP countries in the group of patients with low HAQ score (<1), but not in the groups with intermediate (1–1.99) and high (≥2) HAQ scores. In high-GDP countries the median fatigue score increased from 2.3 (HAQ score <1) to 7.2 (HAQ score >2). The pattern was the same in low-GDP countries, except the median fatigue score in the lowest HAQ-group was 2.9.

In Figure 2, fatigue score was plotted against GDP per capita in each of the participating countries, and showed a strong negative correlation (Persons correlation coefficient=-0.539).

Regression analyses
All variables tested (number of comorbidities, DAS28, HAQ, pain, patient global, age and gender) were statistically significant in the univariate anal-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table I. Characteristics of the study population in high and low GDP countries in the QUEST-RA.</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>High-GDP</th>
<th>Low-GDP</th>
<th>p-value (high vs. low GDP)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of patients with available data</td>
<td>7683–9715</td>
<td>3630–4388</td>
<td>4053–5327</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Patient characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age in years, mean (SD)</td>
<td>54.9 (13.8)</td>
<td>57.8 (13.7)</td>
<td>52.4 (13.4)</td>
<td>0.031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women, %</td>
<td>75.8</td>
<td>74.6</td>
<td>76.9</td>
<td>0.030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disease duration in years</td>
<td>8.1 (3.7–15.0)</td>
<td>8.7 (3.8–16.1)</td>
<td>7.9 (3.6–14.1)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RF positive, %</td>
<td>73.2</td>
<td>71.4</td>
<td>74.7</td>
<td>0.014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erosive disease, %</td>
<td>54.0</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>55.4</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race, caucasian, %</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>83.6</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of comorbidities (0–31)</td>
<td>2 (0–3)</td>
<td>2 (1–3)</td>
<td>1 (0–3)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disease activity measures</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAS28_3, mean (SD)</td>
<td>4.2 (1.58)</td>
<td>3.6 (1.43)</td>
<td>4.7 (1.55)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESR</td>
<td>24 (12–42)</td>
<td>18 (10–34)</td>
<td>30 (16–48)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SJC (0 to 28)</td>
<td>2 (0–6)</td>
<td>2 (0–5)</td>
<td>3 (0–8)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TJC (0 to 28)</td>
<td>4 (1–11)</td>
<td>2 (0–6)</td>
<td>7 (2–14)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physician global (0 to 10)</td>
<td>2.6 (1.4–4.9)</td>
<td>1.7 (0.5–3.5)</td>
<td>3.5 (1.6–5.6)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Patient self-report</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAQ physical function (0 to 3=worst)</td>
<td>0.88 (0.25–1.50)</td>
<td>0.75 (0.25–1.25)</td>
<td>1 (0.37–1.62)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pain VAS (0 to 10)</td>
<td>4 (1.7–6.1)</td>
<td>3.2 (1.2–5.8)</td>
<td>4.5 (2.1–6.5)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient global VAS (0 to 10=worst)</td>
<td>4.1 (1.9–5.9)</td>
<td>3.2 (1.3–5.4)</td>
<td>4.7 (2.5–6.4)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatigue VAS (0 to 10=worst)</td>
<td>4.4 (1.8–6.8)</td>
<td>3.8 (1.4–6)</td>
<td>4.8 (2.2–7)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1: Chi-squared test; 2: Mann-Whitney U-Test; 3: t-test. Variables are median (IQR) unless otherwise mentioned.

DAS28_3: Disease activity score in 28 joints (based on 3 variables); ESR: erythrocyte sedimentation rate; GDP: gross domestic product; HAQ: health assessment questionnaire; IQR: interquartile range; Physician global: physician global estimate of status; RF: rheumatoid factor; SJC: swollen joint count; SD: standard deviation; TJC: tender joint count; VAS: visual analogue scale.

Table II. Distribution of comorbidities in low- and high-GDP countries in the QUEST-RA.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comorbidities</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>High-GDP %</th>
<th>Low-GDP %</th>
<th>p-value (high vs. low GDP countries)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hypertension</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angina</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>0.058</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart attack</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coronary artery disease</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>0.436</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other heart disease</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypertension</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peripheral vascular disease</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peptic ulcer disease</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>0.724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflammatory bowel disease</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impaired renal function</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>0.876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asthma</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic bronchitis</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>0.272</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diabetes mellitus</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>0.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thyroid disease</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>0.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cancer</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stroke</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parkinson’s disease</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.808</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic back pain</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>0.002</td>
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<tr>
<td>Musculoskeletal trauma</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low energy fractures</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>0.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osteoporosis at scan</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>0.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osteoarthritis</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>0.856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infection requiring hospitalisation</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herpes zoster/Shingles</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fibromyalgia</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>0.033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psoriasis</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cataracts</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychiatric disease</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIDS</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.824</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alcoholism</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obesity (BMI&gt;30 kg/m²)</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>0.128</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Mann-Whitney U-test.
In the multiple regression analysis for the total QUEST-RA cohort with fatigue as the dependent variable, comorbidities (0 to 31), DAS28 and HAQ, but not GDP, were statistically significant explanatory variables after adjustment for age and gender (Table III). Together, these 3 variables explained 29.4% of the variability.

For high-GDP countries, comorbidities, DAS28 and HAQ were independent explanatory variables for fatigue and explained 29.5% of variability in fatigue. In low-GDP countries fatigue was associated with HAQ and DAS28, but not with comorbidity burden, and the two variables together had an $R^2$ value of 0.284 (Table III).

**Discussion**

The main finding in this large, multinational study was that fatigue remains a major problem for RA patients in all countries with one in four patients scoring high on fatigue. Overall, increased comorbidity burden, disease activity and disability were independently associated with increased fatigue regardless of the standard of living as expressed by GDP per capita. Patients in low-GDP countries suffered more fatigue, which was explained by higher disease activity and HAQ.

The most common comorbidities were related to cardiovascular disease with hypertension affecting one in three patients and hyperlipidaemia one in six patients and diabetes affecting 7%. Osteoporosis with or without fracture had been diagnosed in more than 15% of patients and overall 14.1% of patients were obese with a BMI $>30$ kg/m$^2$. About 10% reported to be suffering from thyroid diseases. Peptic ulcer disease was also a common complication, and chronic back pain and osteoarthritis were prevalent conditions (13–15%). A previous study from Spain including 277 patients reported similar results for hypertension (27%) and thyroid disease (13%), but a higher prevalence for obesity (26%), and also respiratory (12%) and upper gastrointestinal disorders (10%) were prevalent(16). Chung et al. reported hypertension in 57% of
The prevalence of osteoporosis was similar in a study of 394 female RA patients in Oslo, in which an overall frequency of 14.7% in femoral neck and total hip and 16.8% in the spine was reported. This was a two-fold higher prevalence of osteoporosis compared with that in the general population (19).

We were surprised that patients in high-GDP countries reported more comorbidities than patients in low-GDP countries. Since the registration was based on interviews, we were not able to validate the findings, and we have no information regarding the severity of the comorbidities. It is, however, likely that comorbidities are under-diagnosed and probably less effectively treated in poorer countries. Currently, only few studies of comorbidities in patients with RA in low-GDP countries have been conducted. The Brazilian Society of Rheumatology (SBR) recently published a paper aiming at developing recommendations for the diagnosis and management of comorbidities in patients with RA (20). They focused on what they expected to be the most common and severe comorbidities: hypertension, diabetes mellitus, dyslipidemia, atherosclerosis, metabolic syndrome, venous thrombosis and pulmonary embolism, malignancies and osteoporosis. No prevalence has been reported so far. This project reflects an important, initial focus on the comorbid burden in RA patients in low-GDP countries. Two studies from India focused on subclinical atherosclerosis (21, 22). In the first study, 19 of 57 RA patients (33.3%) and 2 of 45 controls (4.4%) had abnormal carotid intima-media thickness (validated surrogate marker of atherosclerosis) measured by ultrasound (21). In the second study, including 35 early RA patients and 35 healthy controls, the carotid intima-media thickness was significantly higher in RA patients than in controls (22), which suggests that patients with early RA have premature atherosclerosis. One may hypothesise

Table III. Uni- and multi-variate linear regression analyses adjusted for age and gender to identify factors contributing to fatigue in the QUEST-RA study in 34 countries with high (>24,000 USD per capita) or low GDP (<24,000 USD).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comorbidity</th>
<th>Total Population Coefficients</th>
<th>High-GDP Countries Coefficients</th>
<th>Low-GDP Countries Coefficients</th>
<th>Total Population Coefficients</th>
<th>High-GDP Countries Coefficients</th>
<th>Low-GDP Countries Coefficients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>p-value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comorbidities 0–31</td>
<td>0.241 (0.212–0.270)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.279 (0.238–0.321)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.234 (0.187–0.269)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAS28_3</td>
<td>0.697 (0.660–0.734)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.677 (0.617–0.738)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.727 (0.677–0.776)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAQ</td>
<td>1.938 (1.873–2.004)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>2.054 (1.950–2.157)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>1.830 (1.744–1.915)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Coefficients (95% confidence intervals) are presented. DAS28_3: disease activity score in 28 joints (based on 3 variables), HAQ: health assessment questionnaire; GDP: gross domestic product; QUEST-RA: quantitative Standard monitoring of patients with rheumatoid arthritis; USD: US dollars. N and R² were 7,414 and 0.294 in the total population, respectively. For high-GDP countries, they were 3,407 and 0.295, and for low GDP-countries 4,411 and 0.285, respectively.
that under-diagnosing comorbidities in low-GDP countries may, at least in part, explain why fatigue was only independently associated with the number of comorbidities in high-GDP countries. The comorbidities may also be more severe in low-GDP countries due to limited treatment resources. In contrast, DAS28 and HAQ were positively associated with fatigue in all regression analyses irrespectively of GDP status. The inflammatory activity of RA is reflected in the DAS28 score. We found the DAS28 score to be inversely associated with GDP. This was consistent with previous findings on a smaller sample size (10). In the present study there was a negative correlation between fatigue and GDP. In the multivariate analysis the high level of fatigue in low-GDP countries seemed to be explained by higher disease activity level. This supports the hypothesis that inflammation is a significant source of fatigue in RA. Two studies from the nineties reported that fatigue is associated with disability (2, 23), and the present study demonstrated that this is still the case in today’s RA patients. Thus we found a doubling in fatigue score from 2.3 (high-GDP) and 2.9 (low-GDP) to 7.2 between patients with the lowest HAQ score (<1) and patients with the highest HAQ score (>2). Our findings are supported by a Dutch study, which reported that patients with severe fatigue scored on average 0.6 units higher on HAQ, compared to patients without severe fatigue (24). In 557 patients from a hospital in the United Kingdom, fatigue was associated with DAS28, HAQ and pain. Correlation with fatigue was strongest for HAQ, and together the 3 variables explained 54% of the variance in fatigue score (25). They did not investigate how comorbidities were related to fatigue. In the present study, we found that fatigue was a significant problem also in patients with little pain. In our model comorbidities (0–31), DAS28 and HAQ explained 30% of the variance in fatigue, which means that 70% of the variation in fatigue was caused by other factors including, e.g., pain and psychosocial factors. RA patients rate fatigue as a very important aspect of the disease (4, 26). No internationally accepted definition of how to assess fatigue has been established (27). In the present study, fatigue was scored by the patients on a 10 cm visual analogue scale. It is generally accepted that fatigue is a complex symptom and remains an enigma (28). It is caused by interaction of clinical factors and psychosocial issues (29), which has far-reaching consequences (30, 31). Hewlett et al. have proposed a conceptual model for RA fatigue (32), suggesting interactions between three factors: 1) disease processes (RA), 2) thoughts, feelings and behaviours, and 3) personal life issues including health issues such as comorbidities. In this study we confirmed the influence of disease processes (expressed as DAS28 and HAQ) on fatigue, but also demonstrated that comorbidities contribute to the fatigue burden in high-GDP countries. It remains unknown how psychosocial parameters, cultural and economic factors impact on RA patients’ experience of fatigue. This study has several limitations. First, it is possible that more RA patients with poor clinical status visit clinics in countries with lower GDP, and patients with better status in richer countries have a lower threshold to seek medical care and better treatment may be available in high GDP countries. Also the comorbidities were partly self-reported and may not be accurate. Secondly, we lack an objective marker of fatigue. We used the uni-dimensional VAS fatigue. Hewlett et al. have validated 23 different scales that have been used to measure RA fatigue. Seventeen scales had limited or no data on validation in RA. The VAS fatigue was one of only six scales, which were found to be reasonably valid and sensitive to change (27).

Conclusion

In conclusion, fatigue remains a widespread problem for RA patients. Fatigue score increases with increasing comorbidity burden, disease activity, and disability regardless of GDP. Patients in low-GDP countries suffered more fatigue, which was partially explained by higher disease activity. The percentage of patients with comorbidities was overall higher in high-GDP countries, but comorbidities might be under-diagnosed especially in low-GDP countries. The results of this study support the importance of improving the clinical status of patients with RA in all countries, which may in turn have a significant impact on and improve fatigue status in this patient group. Further other factors that contribute to fatigue need to be studied to improve overall quality of life of patients with RA.

The QUEST-RA Group is composed of the following members

Argentina: Sergio Toloza, Santiago Aguero, Sergio Orellana Barrera, Soledad Retamozo, Hospital San Juan Bautista, Catamarca, Paula Alba, Cruz Lascano, Alejandra Babini, Eduardo Albiero, Hospital of Cordoba, Cordoba, Eduardo Kerzberg, Ramos Mejia Hospital, Buenos Aires, Argentina; Bolivia: Susana Lucero Hospital Militar y Caja Petrolera de Salud, Moises Martinez en el Hospital de la Caja de Salud, Jaime Maranon, Hospital del Seguro Universitario, Cochabamba; Cintya Sinani, Hospital del Seguro Universitario, Manuel Montero, Hospital General, La Paz; Walter Camacho, Hospital Militar, Santa Cruz; Brazil: Gerald da Rocha Castelan Pinheiro, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Licia Maria Henrique da Mota, Hospital Universitario de Brasilia, Ines Quimaraes da Silveira, Pontificia Universidad Catolica do Rio Grande do Sul (PUCRS), Porto Alegre, FAC Rocha, Universidad Federal do Ceara, Fortaleza, Ieda Maria Magalhães Laurindo, Universidade Estadual de Sao Paulo, Sao Paulo; Canada: Juris Lazovskis, Riverside Professional Center, Sydney, NS; Colombia: Pedro Santos, Juan Bello, Mafe Cubides, Diana Benavides, Laura Villareal, real, Andrea Urbina, Biobam IPS - Center for Rheumatoid Arthritis, Bogota; Denmark: Merete Lund Hetland, Lykke Ønbjerg, Kathrine Grön, Cecilie Mardal, Glostrup Hospital, Glostrup and University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark, Kim Hørle-Petersen, King Christian the Xth Hospital, Grästen, Troels Mørk Hansen, Lene Surland Knudsen, Copenhagen Univ Hospital at Herlev, Herlev; Egypt: Hisham Hamoud, Mohamad Sobhy, Ahmad Fahmy, Mohamad Magdy, Hany Aly, Hatem Saeid, Ahmad Nagm, Al-Azhar University, Cairo, Nihal A Fathi, Essam A Abda, Assuit University Hospital, Zahraa I Selim, Assuit University Hospital; Estonia: Raidi Müller, Reet Kusse, Marika Tammaru, Riina Kallikorm, Tartu University Hospital, Tartu, Tony Peets, Kati Otsa, Karin Laas, East-Tallinn Central Hospi-
tal, Tallinn, Ivo Valter, Center for Clinical and Basic Research, Tallinn; Finland: Heidi Mäkinen, Jyväskylä Central Hospital, Jyväskylä, and Tampere University Hospital, Tampere, Kai Immonen, Sinikka Forsberg, Jukka Lähteenmäki, North Karelia Central Hospital, Joensuu, Reijo Luukkainen, Santakunta Central Hospital, Rauma; Markku Kauppi, Lahti Central Hospital, Lahti; France: Laure Gossec, Maxime DDougados, University René Descartes, Hôpital Cochin, Paris, Jean Francis Maillefer, Dijon University Hospital, University of Burgundy, and INSERM U887, Dijon, Bernard Combe, Hôpital Lapeyronie, Montpellier, Jean Sibilia, Hôpital Haupteipierre, Strasbourg; Germany: Gertraud Herborn, Rolf Rau, Siegfried Wassenberg, Evangelisches Fachkrankenhaus, Ratingen, Rieke Alten, Christof Pohl, Schlosspark-Klinik, Berlin, Gerd R Burmester, Bettina Marsmann, Jacqueline Detert, Charles – University Medicine Berlin, Berlin; Greece: Alexandros A, Drosos, Sofia Exarchou, University of Ioannina, Ioannina, H M Moutsopoulos, Afrodite Tsirogianni, School of Medicine, National University of Athens, Athens, Fotini N Skopoulia, Maria Pavrommati, Euroclinic Hospital, Athens; Hungary: Pál Geher, Semmelweis University of Medical Science, Budapest, Bernadette Rojkovich, Ivona Újfalussy, Polyclinic University in Budapest, Budapest; Ireland: Barry Brennan, St. Vincent University Hospital, Dublin, Patricia Minnock, Our Lady’s Hospice, Dublin, Eithne Murphy, Claire Sheehy, Edel Quirke, Connolly Hospital, Dublin, Joe Devlin, Shaifeeq Alraiqi, Waterford Regional Hospital, Waterford; India: Amita Aggarwal, Department of Immunology, Lucknow, Sapan C Pandya, Vedanta Institute of medical Sciences, Ahmedabad, Banwari Sharma, Department of Immunology, Jaipur Hospital; Italy: Massimiliano Cazzato, Stefano Bombardieri, Santa Chiara Hospital, Pisa, Gianfranco Ferraccioli, Alessia Morelli, Catholic University of Sacred Heart, Rome, Maurizio Cutolo, University of Genova, Genova, Italy, Fausto Salaffi, Andrea Stancati, University of Ancona, Ancona; Japan: Hisashi Yamanaka, Ayako Nakajima, Institute of Rheumatology, Tokyo Women’s Medical University, Tokyo, Wataru Fukuda, Department of Rheumatology, Kyoto First Red Cross Hospital, Kyoto, Eisuke Shono, Shono Rheumatism Clinic, Fukuoka; Korea: Shin-Seok Lee, Chonnam National University Medical School, Gwangju; Jung-Yoon Choe, Catholic University of Daegu School of Medicine; Daegu, Eun Bong Lee, Seoul National University College of Medicine, Seoul; Kosovo: Sylejman Rexhepi, Mellma Rexhepi, Blerta Rexhepi Rheumatology Department, Pristina; Latvia: Daina Andersone, Sauls Stradina Clinical University Hospital, Riga; Lithuania: Sigita Stropuviene, Jolanta Dandioniene, Institute of Experimental and Clinical Medicine at Vilnius University, Vilnius, Asta Baranauskaite, Kaunas University Hospital, Kaunas; Morocco: Najia Hajaj-Hassouni, Karima Benouazzouz, Fadoua Allali, Rachid Bahiri, Bouchra Amine, El Ayachi Hospital Mohamed Vh Souissi University, Rabat; Netherlands: Johannes WG Jacobs, Suzan MM Verstappen, University Medical Center Utrecht, Utrecht, Margriet Huisman, Femke Bonte-Mineur, Chiara Messidoro, Sint Franciscus Gasthuis, Rotterdam, Monique Hockstra, Medisch Spectrum Twente, Enschede; Norway: Glenn Haugeberg, Hilde Gjelberg, Eirik Wilberg, Sørlandet Hospital, Kristiansand; Poland: Stanisław Sierakowski, Medical University in Białystok, Białystok, Maria Majdan, Medical University of Lublin, Lublin, Wojciech Romanowski, Poznan Rheumatology Center in Srem, Srem, Witold Tlustochowicz, Military Institute of Medicine, Warsaw, Danuta Kaplicka, Silesian Hospital for Rheumatology and Rehabilitation in Ustron Slaski, Ustroń Slaski, Stefan Sadkiewicz, Szpital Wojewódzki im. Jana Biezla, Bydgoszcz, Danuta Zarowny-Wierzbinska, Wojewódzki Zespół Reumatologiczny im. dr Jadwigi Titz-Kosko, Sopot; Romania: Ruxandra Ionescu, Denisa Predescu, Spitalul Clinic SF Maria, Bucharest, Lia Georgescu, Spitalul Clinic Jundetean de Urgenta Mures, Targu Mures, Rodica Maria Chiriac, Codrina Ancuta, Gr. T. Popa University of Medicine and Pharmacy Iasi, Iasi; Russia: Dmitry Karateev, Elena Luchikhina, Institute of Rheumatology of Russian Academy of Medical Sciences, Moscow, Natalia Chichusova, Moscow Medical Academy, Moscow, Vladimir Badokin, Russian Medical Academy of Postgraduate Education, Moscow, Ivan Shirinsky, Polovnikova Oksana, Institute of Clinical Immunology RAMS, Novosibirsk; Serbia: Vladko Skakic, Aleksander Dimic, Jovan Nedovic, Aleksandra Stankovic, Rheumatology Institut, Niska Banja; Spain: Antonio Naranjo, Carlos Rodriguez-Lozano, Hospital de Gran Canaria Dr. Negrín, Las Palmas, Jaime Calvo-Alen, Hospital Tierallana Ganzo, Torrelavega, Miguel Belmonte, Hospital General de Castellón, Castellon; Sweden: Ewa Baecklund, Uppsala University Hospital, Dan Henroth, Department of Medical Sciences, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Rolf Oding, Margarethe Liveborn, Central-lasaretet, Västerås, Ann-Carin Holmqvist, Hudiksvall Medical Clinic, Hudiksvall; Turkey: Feride Gogus, Gazi University Medical Faculty, Ankara, Recep Tunc, Meram Medical Faculty, Konya, Selda Celik, Cerrahpaşa Medic Faculty, Nevsun Inanc, Haner Direskeneli, Marmara University, Istanbul; Taiwan: Hui-Chu Lang, National Yang-Ming University, Taipei, Hsiao-Yi Lin, MD Taipei Veterans General Hospital, Taipei, Ying-Ming Chiu, MD Changhua Christian Hospital, Changshun, Shing-Shing Lee, MD Cheng Hsin Hospital, Taipai; United Arab Emirates: Humeira Badsha, Dubai Bone and Joint Center, Dubai, Ayman Motfi, Alibraa clinic, Dubai; United Kingdom: Peter Taylor, Catherine McClinton, Charing Cross Hospital, London, Anthony Woolf, Ginny Chorghade, Royal Cornwall Hospital, Truro, Frances Borg, Essex University Southend University Hospital, Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex; United States of America: Theodore Pincus, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, Yusuf Yazici, NYU Hospital for Joint Diseases, New York, NY, Martin Bergman, Taylor Hospital, Ridley Park, PA, Jurgen Craig-Muller, CentraCare Clinic, St. Cloud, MN, Ruben A Peredo, Univ of Michigan Health System, Ann Arbor, MI; Study Center: T. Sokka, Hannu Kautiainen, Jyväskylä Central Hospital, Jyväskylä; Medcare Oy, Äänekoski, Finland, Christo-pher Swearingen, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, Little Rock, AR, The-odore Pincus, New York University Hospital for Joint Diseases, New York, NY, USA, Nasim Khan, Fawad Aslam University of Arkansas, Division of Rheumatology, Little Rock, AR, USA.

References


