Response to: ‘Antisynthetase syndrome or what else? Different perspectives indicate the need for new classification criteria’ by Cavagna et al

We thank Cavagna et al1 for their thoughtful analysis relating to our recent publication.1 Several important points are raised, many of which we also referred to. It is of great interest and reassurance that the demographics and clinical features of antisynthetase syndrome (ASS) are broadly similar between the AENAES (American and European NETwork of Anti-Synthetase syndrome) and EuroMyositis cohorts. Clearly the frequency of interstitial lung disease and arthritis differs due to the sources of case ascertainment. This highlights the importance when evaluating the natural history and demographics of a disease presenting with heterogeneity that one must use more than one source of case ascertainment.

The paradigm of classification of the idiopathic inflammatory myopathies (IIM), particularly with regard to ASS, is a subject of much debate. This reflects our developing understanding of these disorders and the growing agreement regarding the importance of autoantibody status in determining a phenotype. One unanswered question relates to the heterogeneity within the ASS spectrum and the underlying mechanisms that explain why certain antisynthetase antibodies (ASAs) are associated with certain clinical phenotypes. We also agree that if the shift towards disease definition according to clinico-serological syndrome is to continue, harmonisation of antibody testing methodologies is required. However, exceptions are required for patients displaying typical clinical features of ASS, but without a detectable ASAs, in some cases almost certainly the consequence of the presence of a hitherto unrecognised antibody or the limitations of current antibody testing methodologies.

To develop a well-rounded knowledge of ASS, future collaboration across multiple disease specialities is vital. Together with other groups such as the International Myositis Assessment and Clinical Studies Group (https://www.niehs.nih.gov/research/resources/imacs/index.cfm) and the European Reference Network for Rare Diseases, future standardised classification criteria will be developed. We agree that the presence of skeletal muscle inflammation should not be a prerequisite for the diagnosis of ASS and that labelling such patients as having an IIM is becoming less intuitive. More accurate clinico-serological criteria will allow more homogeneous participant groups in research studies, and in the future allow for more targeted therapies.

We look forward to broadening the existing collaboration between our groups, facilitated through the recently awarded Foundation for Research in Rheumatology grant (http://www.foreum.org/prg_13_myositis_transition.cfm). It is only with such collaborative efforts that we can advance our search for a more accurate diagnosis and better treatment options in the future.

James B Lilleker,1,2 Jiri Vencovsky,3 Guochun Wang,4 Lucy R Wedderburn,5 Louise P Diederichsen,6 Jens Schmidt,7 Paula Jordan,8 Olivier Benveniste,9 James B Lilleker,1,2 Jiri Vencovsky,3 Guochun Wang,4 Lucy R Wedderburn,5

1Division of Musculoskeletal and Dermatological Sciences, Faculty of Biology, Medicine and Health, Manchester Academic Health Science Centre, Centre for Musculoskeletal Research, School of Biological Sciences, The University of Manchester, Manchester, UK
2Greater Manchester Neurosciences Centre, Salford Royal NHS Foundation Trust, Stott Lane, UK
3Institute of Rheumatology, Prague, Czech Republic
4Department of Rheumatology, China-Japan Friendship Hospital, Beijing, China
5University College London GOS Institute of Child Health and NIHR GOSH Biomedical Research Centre, Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Trust, London, UK
6Department of Rheumatology, Odense University Hospital, Odense, Denmark
7Department of Neurology, University Medical Center Göttingen, Göttingen, Germany
8Myositis UK, Southampton, UK
9Département de Médecine Interne et Immunologie Clinique, Hôpital Pitié-Salpêtrière, AP-HP, UPMC, Paris, France
10Division of Scienze Cliniche e Molecolari, Clinica Medica, Università Politecnica delle Marche and Ospedali Riuniti, Ancona, Italy
11Department of Immunology, University of Debrecen, Debrecen, Hungary
12Department of Rheumatology, Bach Mai Hospital, Hanoi Medical University, Hanoi, Vietnam
13Division de Medicina Interna, Servicio de Reumatología, PNPC 004086, CONACyT, Hospital Civil Dr Juan I Menchaca, Guadalajara, Jalisco, Salvador Quevedo y Zubieta S/N, Guadalajara, Mexico
14Department of Rheumatology, Oslo University Hospital, Oslo, Norway
15Department of Neurology, Ghent University Hospital, Ghent, Belgium
16Department of Rheumatology, University Hospital Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland
17Department of Rheumatology, Aler Hey Children’s NHS Foundation Trust, Liverpool, UK
18Department of Rheumatology, Arcispedale S Maria Nuova-IRCCS of Reggio Emilia, Reggio Emilia, Italy
19Royal National Hospital for Rheumatic Diseases, Royal United Hospitals Bath, Bath, UK
20Department of Pharmacy and Pharmacology, University of Bath, Bath, UK
21MRC-ARUK Institute for Ageing and Chronic Disease, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK
22Division of Population Health, Health Services Research and Primary Care, Faculty of Biology, Medicine and Health, School of Health Sciences, Manchester Academic Health Science Centre, The University of Manchester, Manchester, UK
23ZiteLab ApS, Frederiksberg, Denmark
24Unit of Rheumatology, Department of Medicine, Karolinska University Hospital, Solna, Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, Sweden
25Rheumatology Department, Salford Royal NHS Foundation Trust, Manchester Academic Health Science Centre, Salford, UK
26The National Institute for Health Research Manchester Musculoskeletal Biomedical Research Unit, Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust, Manchester Academic Health Science Centre, The University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

Correspondence to Dr Hector Chinoy, Centre for Musculoskeletal Research, The University of Manchester, Manchester M13 9PT, UK; hector.chinoy@manchester.ac.uk

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