



New remote cerebral microbleeds in acute ischemic stroke: an analysis of the randomized, placebo-controlled WAKE-UP trial

Tim Bastian Braemswig^{1,2,3} · Jan Vynckier⁴ · Märit Jensen⁵ · Florent Boutitie^{6,7} · Ivana Galinovic³ · Claus Z. Simonsen⁸ · Bastian Cheng⁵ · Tae-Hee Cho⁹ · Jan F. Scheitz^{1,2,3,10} · Jens Fiehler¹¹ · Josep Puig¹² · Vincent Thijs^{13,21} · Jochen B. Fiebach³ · Keith W. Muir¹⁴ · Norbert Nighoghossian⁹ · Martin Ebinger^{3,15} · Salvador Pedraza¹² · Götz Thomalla⁵ · Christian Gerloff⁵ · Matthias Endres^{1,2,3,10,16,17} · Robin Lemmens^{18,19,20} · Ludwig Schlemm^{1,2,3} · Christian H. Nolte^{1,2,3,10,16} · on behalf of the WAKE-UP Investigators

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Abbreviations

AIS Acute ischemic stroke
CAA Cerebral amyloid angiopathy
CMB Cerebral microbleed
ICH Intracranial hemorrhage

IVT Intravenous thrombolysis
MRI Magnetic resonance imaging
mRS Modified Rankin Scale
NIHSS National Institutes of Health Stroke Scale
SD Standard deviation

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✉ Tim Bastian Braemswig
tim-bastian.braemswig@charite.de

- ¹ Klinik und Hochschulambulanz für Neurologie, Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin, Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität Zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany
- ² Berlin Institute of Health (BIH), Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin, Berlin, Germany
- ³ Center for Stroke Research Berlin (CSB), Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin, Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany
- ⁴ Neurology Department, Head of Stroke Unit, Moorselbaan 164, 9300 Aalst, Belgium
- ⁵ Klinik und Poliklinik für Neurologie, Kopf- und Neurozentrum, Universitätsklinikum Hamburg–Eppendorf, Hamburg, Germany
- ⁶ Service de Biostatistique, Hospices Civils de Lyon, Lyon, France
- ⁷ UMR 5558, Laboratoire de Biométrie et Biologie Evolutive, Université Lyon 1 and Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Equipe Biostatistique-Santé, Villeurbanne, France
- ⁸ Department of Neurology, Aarhus University Hospital, Aarhus, Denmark
- ⁹ Department of Stroke Medicine, Université Claude Bernard Lyon 1, and Hospices Civils de Lyon, Lyon, France

- ¹⁰ German Center for Cardiovascular Research (DZHK), Partner Site Berlin, Berlin, Germany
- ¹¹ Department of Diagnostic and Interventional Neuroradiology, University Medical Center Hamburg–Eppendorf, Hamburg, Germany
- ¹² Doctor Josep Trueta University Hospital, Department of Radiology (IDI), Girona Biomedical Research Institute (IDIBGI), Girona, Spain
- ¹³ Department of Neurology, Austin Health, Heidelberg, Australia
- ¹⁴ Institute of Neuroscience and Psychology, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK
- ¹⁵ Department of Neurology, Medical Park Berlin Humboldtmühle, Berlin, Germany
- ¹⁶ German Center for Neurodegenerative Diseases (DZNE), Partner Site Berlin, Berlin, Germany
- ¹⁷ ExcellenceCluster NeuroCure, Charité-Universitätsmedizin Berlin, Berlin, Germany
- ¹⁸ Department of Neurology, University Hospitals Leuven, Leuven, Belgium
- ¹⁹ Department of Neurosciences, Experimental Neurology, KU Louvain–University of Leuven, Leuven, Belgium
- ²⁰ VIB-KU Leuven Center for Brain and Disease Research, Laboratory of Neurobiology, Leuven, Belgium
- ²¹ Stroke Division, Florey Institute of Neuroscience and Mental Health, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

Dear Sirs,

Cerebral microbleeds (CMB), detected as hypointense foci on blood-sensitive magnet resonance imaging (MRI), are a marker of cerebral small vessel disease [1]. Neuropathological examinations revealed that a subset of CMBs contain intact erythrocytes, indicating recent microhemorrhage [1]. In a prior observational study, new CMBs occurred in 4% of acute ischemic stroke (AIS) patients after receiving intravenous thrombolysis (IVT) with alteplase. New CMBs were associated with an increased risk for post-IVT intracerebral hemorrhage [2].

Here, we took the unique opportunity to assess the risk of IVT for the occurrence of new CMBs in AIS patients who had been randomly assigned to either alteplase (0.9 mg/kg) or placebo within the WAKE-UP trial (Efficacy and Safety of MRI-Based Thrombolysis in Wake-Up Stroke, ClinicalTrials.gov: NCT01525290)[3].

Eligible patients for this exploratory analysis had received two cerebral MRI examinations—one before and one after treatment (alteplase or placebo)—with the same field strength (i.e., 1.5 Tesla or 3 Tesla) and the same blood-sensitive MRI sequence (i.e., susceptibility weighted imaging (SWI) or T2*/gradient-recalled echo (GRE)). Parameters of the blood-sensitive MRI sequences varied according to center and manufacturer with slice thickness ranging from 1.5 to 7 mm, echo time (TE) from 11 to 51 ms, and repetition time (TR) from 460 to 2460 ms [4].

The CMBs were defined, according to consensus recommendations, as small (up to 10 mm in diameter), round or oval hypointense lesions with associated blooming seen on blood-sensitive MRI sequences [1]. The CMBs were rated by three raters (TBB, JV, LS) blinded to clinical information (with a very good inter-rater reliability as described previously [4]). New CMBs were categorized according to their distribution as lobar, deep (i.e., basal ganglia, thalamus) or infratentorial (i.e., brainstem, cerebellum) [4]. Newly appearing CMBs in the acute infarcted area, as seen on diffusion-weighted imaging, were not classified as new CMBs [2, 4].

Intracranial hemorrhage (ICH) was assessed on follow-up imaging 22 to 36 h after treatment.

The primary outcome was the proportion of patients with new CMBs on follow-up imaging (in the alteplase and placebo group). Secondary outcomes included symptomatic ICH according to the protocol of the Safe Implementation of Thrombolysis in Stroke—Monitoring Study (SITS-MOST) [5] and degree of disability, quantified on the modified Rankin Scale (mRS) 90 days after treatment (excellent outcome: mRS ≤ 1 , severe dependency or death: mRS 4–6) [3].

Of 503 patients included in the WAKE-UP trial, 350 patients were available for final analysis (175 with alteplase,

175 with placebo; 129 patients were not sequentially examined on the same MRI scanners, image quality of the blood-sensitive MRI sequence was too poor for analysis in 24 patients). Patients included in the final analysis did not differ regarding age and sex compared to excluded patients (mean age: 64.7 [patients included, standard deviation [SD]: 11.8] vs. 66.3 [patients excluded, SD: 10.8], $p=0.15$, t test; female: 120/350 [34.3%] vs. 58/153 [37.9%], $p=0.50$, chi-squared test). However, there were fewer ICH in patients included in the final analysis (76/350 [22%] vs. 47/146 [32%]; $p=0.02$, chi-squared test).

New CMBs occurred in four patients. Noteworthy, all patients with new CMBs had received alteplase resulting in a rate of 2.3% (4/175 patients; 95% confidence interval: 0.6–5.8%). Three patients had one new CMB and one patient had two new CMBs. Distribution of new CMBs was strictly lobar in all four patients (a pattern suggestive of underlying cerebral amyloid angiopathy [1, 6]) and preexisting CMBs were present in all patients with new CMBs. One patient with new CMBs had a severe stroke with an NIHSS score of 20 on admission. Any ICH occurred in two patients with new CMBs (hemorrhagic transformation of the infarcted brain tissue (HI2, Class 1b) in one patient and intracerebral hemorrhage within and beyond the infarcted brain tissue (PH2, Class 2) in the other patient [7]). One new CMB occurred contralateral to the hemorrhagic transformation (HI2, Class 1b) in one patient, two new CMBs occurred ipsilateral to the intracerebral hemorrhage (PH2, Class 2) in the other patient. Symptomatic ICH according to SITS-MOST occurred in one patient with new CMBs. Of note, of 76 patients with any ICH, 74 ICHs occurred in patients without new CMBs. At 90 days, one patient with new CMBs achieved an excellent functional outcome (mRS ≤ 1) and two patients with new CMBs had either died or had severe disability. Further details are shown in Table 1. Due to the small number of patients with new CMBs, no inferential statistical analysis was performed.

In this exploratory analysis of the randomized, placebo-controlled WAKE-UP trial, new CMBs occurred exclusively after receiving alteplase.

In the recently published THAWS trial (THrombolysis for Acute Wake-up and Unclear-onset Strokes With Alteplase at 0.6 mg/kg Trial [conducted in Japan]), new CMBs occurred in seven out of 113 AIS patients and were associated with poor neurological outcome [8]. In both study cohorts (WAKE-UP and THAWS) new CMBs occurred only in AIS patients receiving alteplase (as opposed to placebo).

The small number of outcomes, the lack of an inferential statistical analysis, a possible selection bias (ICH occurred more often in patients excluded from this analysis) as well as varying parameters of the blood-sensitive MRI sequences (e.g. slice thickness) in the different centers have to be taken into account when interpreting our findings. However, by

Table 1 Baseline characteristics and outcomes of patients with and without new cerebral microbleeds

	All (<i>n</i> = 350)	No new CMBs (<i>n</i> = 346)	New CMBs (<i>n</i> = 4)
Demographics			
Age, mean (SD)	64.7 (11.8)	64.7 (11.9)	55, 59, 74, 74 ^a
Male, % (<i>n</i>)	230 (65.7%)	226 (65.3%)	4/4 (100%)
Risk factors, % (<i>n</i>)			
Atrial fibrillation	40 (11.6%)	40 (11.7%)	0/4 (0%)
Diabetes mellitus, type 2	50 (14.5%)	49 (14.3%)	1/4 (25%)
Arterial hypertension	183 (52.4%)	181 (52.5%)	2/4 (50%)
History of ischemic stroke	45 (12.9%)	45 (13.0%)	0/4 (0%)
On admission			
NIHSS score, median (IQR)	5 (3;8)	5 (3;8)	1, 5, 6, 20 ^a
Platelet aggregation inhibitors, <i>n</i> (%)	108 (30.9%)	107 (30.9%)	1/4 (25%)
Statins, <i>n</i> (%)	108 (30.9%)	105 (30.3%)	3/4 (75%)
MRI characteristics, <i>n</i> (%)			
Blood-sensitive sequence			
T2*/GRE	322 (92%)	319 (92.2%)	3/4 (75%)
SWI	28 (8%)	27 (7.8%)	1/4 (25%)
Field strength			
1.5 Tesla	175 (50%)	173 (50%)	2/4 (50%)
3 Tesla	175 (50%)	173 (50%)	2/4 (50%)
Time interval between treatment and follow-up MRI, hours, median (IQR) ^b	25.5 (23.5;28.3)	25.6 (23.5;28.3)	22.7, 24.1, 24.5, 29.6 ^a
Pretreatment MRI findings			
CMB presence on pretreatment MRI, <i>n</i> (%)	68 (19.4%)	64 (18.5%)	4/4 (100%)
Number of CMBs on pretreatment MRI, median (IQR)	0 (0;0)	0 (0;0)	1, 1, 5, 5 ^a
Number of CMBs on pretreatment MRI, <i>n</i> (%)			
0	282 (80.6%)	282 (81.5%)	0/4 (0%)
1	32 (9.1%)	30 (8.7%)	2/4 (50%)
2–4	23 (6.6%)	23 (6.6%)	0/4 (0%)
≥ 5	13 (3.7%)	11 (3.2%)	2/4 (50%)
CMBs with a strictly lobar distribution on pretreatment MRI, <i>n</i> (%)	32/68 (47.1%)	29/64 (45.3%)	3/4 (75%)
CMBs with a mixed or strictly deep distribution on pretreatment MRI, <i>n</i> (%)	30/68 (44.1%)	30/64 (46.9%)	0/4 (0%)
Diffusion-weighted imaging lesion volume at baseline, mL, median (IQR) ^c	1.9 (0.7;7.1)	1.9 (0.7;7.1)	0.7, 2.6, 6.3, 18.0
Lacunar infarcts, <i>n</i> (%)	82 (23.4%)	82 (23.7%)	0/4 (0%)
Treatment, <i>n</i> (%)			
Alteplase	175 (50%)	171 (49.4%)	4/4 (100%)
Placebo	175 (50%)	175 (50.6%)	0/4 (0%)
Outcomes			
Any intracranial hemorrhage after treatment, <i>n</i> (%)	76 (21.7%)	74 (21.4%)	2/4 (50%)
Symptomatic intracranial hemorrhage after treatment (SITS-MOST), <i>n</i> (%)	3 (0.9%)	2 (0.6%)	1/4 (25%)
mRS at 90 days, median (IQR)	1 (1;3)	1 (1;3)	1, 2, 5, 5 ^a
Excellent outcome (mRS ≤ 1) at 90 days, <i>n</i> (%)	176 (50.9%)	175 (51.2%)	1/4 (25%)
Severe dependency or death (mRS 4–6) at 90 days, <i>n</i> (%)	42 (12.1%)	40 (11.7%)	2/4 (50%)

CMBs cerebral microbleeds, GRE gradient-recalled echo, IQR interquartile range, MRI magnetic resonance imaging, mRS modified Rankin Scale, NIHSS National Institutes of Health Stroke Scale, SD standard deviation, SITS-MOST Safe Implementation of Thrombolysis in Stroke–Monitoring Study, and SWI susceptibility weighted imaging

^aDue to the small number of outcomes, quantitative variables (age, NIHSS score, time interval between treatment and follow-up MRI, number of CMBs on pretreatment MRI, diffusion-weighted imaging lesion volume at baseline, mRS at 90 days) are reported as single values in patients with new CMBs (*n* = 4)

^bThe variable time interval between treatment and follow-up MRI was known in 345 patients without new CMBs

^cThe variable diffusion-weighted imaging lesion volume at baseline was known in 343 patients without new CMBs

comparing to placebo we were able to assess the effect of alteplase for the occurrence of new CMBs, thereby extending the knowledge of previous observational studies. Considering our results as well as the above-mentioned results from the THAWS trial, there is now accumulating evidence that alteplase contributes to the development of new CMBs in AIS patients. Although new CMBs occur rarely, our data call for further studies to determine if these new CMBs after receiving alteplase increase the risk of poor neurological outcome in AIS patients.

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Griebe, MD:Universitätsklinikum Medizinische Fakultät Mannheim der Universität Heidelberg, Mannheim, Germany; Angelika Alonso, MD:Universitätsklinikum Medizinische Fakultät Mannheim der Universität Heidelberg, Mannheim, Germany; Alexandra Filipov, MD:Universitätsklinikum Medizinische Fakultät Mannheim der Universität Heidelberg, Mannheim, Germany; Annika Marzina, MD:Universitätsklinikum Medizinische Fakultät Mannheim der Universität Heidelberg, Mannheim, Germany; Bettina Anders:Universitätsklinikum Medizinische Fakultät Mannheim der Universität Heidelberg, Mannheim, Germany; Christian Bähr:Universitätsklinikum Medizinische Fakultät Mannheim der Universität Heidelberg, Mannheim, Germany; Carolin Hoyer, MD:Universitätsklinikum Medizinische Fakultät Mannheim der Universität Heidelberg, Mannheim, Germany; Christopher Schwarzbach, MD:Universitätsklinikum Medizinische Fakultät Mannheim der Universität Heidelberg, Mannheim, Germany; Claudia Weber:Universitätsklinikum Medizinische Fakultät Mannheim der Universität Heidelberg, Mannheim, Germany; Eva Hornberger, MD:Universitätsklinikum Medizinische Fakultät Mannheim der Universität Heidelberg, Mannheim, Germany; Hans-Werner Pledl, MD:Universitätsklinikum Medizinische Fakultät Mannheim der Universität Heidelberg, Mannheim, Germany; Matti Klockziem:Universitätsklinikum Medizinische Fakultät Mannheim der Universität Heidelberg, Mannheim, Germany; Markus Stuerminger, MD:Universitätsklinikum Medizinische Fakultät Mannheim der Universität Heidelberg, Mannheim, Germany; Matthias Wittayer:Universitätsklinikum Medizinische Fakultät Mannheim der Universität Heidelberg, Mannheim, Germany; Marc Wolf, MD:Universitätsklinikum Medizinische Fakultät Mannheim der Universität Heidelberg, Mannheim, Germany; Nadja Meyer:Universitätsklinikum Medizinische Fakultät Mannheim der Universität Heidelberg, Mannheim, Germany; Philipp Eisele, MD:Universitätsklinikum Medizinische Fakultät Mannheim der Universität Heidelberg, Mannheim, Germany; Susanne Steinert:Universitätsklinikum Medizinische Fakultät Mannheim der Universität Heidelberg, Mannheim, Germany; Tamara Sauer, MD:Universitätsklinikum Medizinische Fakultät Mannheim der Universität Heidelberg, Mannheim, Germany; Valentin Held, MD:Universitätsklinikum Medizinische Fakultät Mannheim der Universität Heidelberg, Mannheim, Germany; Peter Ringleb, MD:Universitätsklinikum Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany; Simon Nagel, MD:Universitätsklinikum Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany; Roland Veltkamp, MD:Universitätsklinikum Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany; Sönke Schwarting, MD:Universitätsklinikum Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany; Alexander Schwarz, MD:Universitätsklinikum Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany; Christoph Gumbinger, MD:Universitätsklinikum Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany; Christian Hametner, MD:Universitätsklinikum Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany; Hemasse Amiri, MD:Universitätsklinikum Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany; Jan Purucker, MD:Universitätsklinikum Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany; Mareva Ciatipis:Universitätsklinikum Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany; Oliver Menn, MD:Universitätsklinikum Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany; Sibü Mundiyanapurath, MD:Universitätsklinikum Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany; Simon Schieber, MD:Universitätsklinikum Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany; Tobias Kessler, MD:Universitätsklinikum Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany; Tilman Reiff, MD:Universitätsklinikum Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany; Verena Panitz, MD:Universitätsklinikum Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany; Oliver Singer, MD:Klinikum der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt, Germany; Christian Foerch, MD:Klinikum der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt, Germany; Arne Lauer, MD:Klinikum der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt, Germany; Anika Männer:Klinikum der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt, Germany; Alexander Seiler, MD:Klinikum der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt, Germany; Damla Guertzoglu:Klinikum der Johann Wolfgang

Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt, Germany; Jan H. Schäfer, MD:Klinikum der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt, Germany; Katharina Filipiński, MD:Klinikum der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt, Germany; Matthias Lorenz:Klinikum der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt, Germany; Natalia Kurka, MD:Klinikum der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt, Germany; Pia Zeiner, MD:Klinikum der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt, Germany; Waltraud Pfeilschifter, MD:Klinikum der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt, Germany; Rainer Dziewas, MD:Universitätsklinikum Münster, Münster, Germany; Jens Minnerup, MD:Universitätsklinikum Münster, Münster, Germany; Christian Albiker, MD:Universitätsklinikum Münster, Münster, Germany; Martin Ritter, MD:Universitätsklinikum Münster, Münster, Germany; Matthias Seidel, MD:Universitätsklinikum Münster, Münster, Germany; Ralf Dittrich, MD:Universitätsklinikum Münster, Münster, Germany; Bernd Kallmünzer, MD:Universitätsklinikum Erlangen, Erlangen, Germany; Tobias Bobinger, MD:Universitätsklinikum Erlangen, Erlangen, Germany; Dominik Madzar, MD:Universitätsklinikum Erlangen, Erlangen, Germany; David Stark, MD:Universitätsklinikum Erlangen, Erlangen, Germany; Jochen Sembill, MD:Universitätsklinikum Erlangen, Erlangen, Germany; Kosmas Macha, MD:Universitätsklinikum Erlangen, Erlangen, Germany; Klemens Winder, MD:Universitätsklinikum Erlangen, Erlangen, Germany; Lorenz Breuer, MD:Universitätsklinikum Erlangen, Erlangen, Germany; Martin Koehrmann, MD:Universitätsklinikum Erlangen, Erlangen, Germany; Maximilian Spruegel, MD:Universitätsklinikum Erlangen, Erlangen, Germany; Stefan Gerner, MD:Universitätsklinikum Erlangen, Erlangen, Germany; Sebastian Moeller:Universitätsklinikum Erlangen, Erlangen, Germany; Peter Kraft, MD:Universitätsklinikum Würzburg, Würzburg, Germany; Daniel Mackenrodt:Universitätsklinikum Würzburg, Würzburg, Germany; Christoph Kleinschnitz, MD:Universitätsklinikum Würzburg, Würzburg, Germany; Ahmed Elhfnawy:Universitätsklinikum Würzburg, Würzburg, Germany; Florian Heinen, MD:Universitätsklinikum Würzburg, Würzburg, Germany; Ignaz Gunreben, MD:Universitätsklinikum Würzburg, Würzburg, Germany; Sven Poli, MD:Universitätsklinikum Tübingen, Tübingen, Germany; Ulf Ziemann, MD:Universitätsklinikum Tübingen, Tübingen, Germany; Alexandra Gaenslen:Universitätsklinikum Tübingen, Tübingen, Germany; Dennis Schlak, MD:Universitätsklinikum Tübingen, Tübingen, Germany; Florian Haertig:Universitätsklinikum Tübingen, Tübingen, Germany; Francesca Russo:Universitätsklinikum Tübingen, Tübingen, Germany; Hardy Richter:Universitätsklinikum Tübingen, Tübingen, Germany; Matthias Ebner:Universitätsklinikum Tübingen, Tübingen, Germany; Martin Ribitsch, MD:Universitätsklinikum Tübingen, Tübingen, Germany; Martin Wolf, MD:Universitätsklinikum Tübingen, Tübingen, Germany; Christian Weimar, MD:Universitätsklinikum Essen, Essen, Germany; Vesna Zegarac, MD:Universitätsklinikum Essen, Essen, Germany; Hsin-Chieh Chen:Universitätsklinikum Essen, Essen, Germany; Katharina Althaus, MD:RKU-Universitäts- und Rehabilitationskliniken Ulm, Ulm, Germany; Hermann Neugebauer, MD:RKU-Universitäts- und Rehabilitationskliniken Ulm, Ulm, Germany; Eric Jüttler, MD:RKU-Universitäts- und Rehabilitationskliniken Ulm, Ulm, Germany; Julia Meier:RKU-Universitäts- und Rehabilitationskliniken Ulm, Ulm, Germany; Sebastian Stösser:RKU-Universitäts- und Rehabilitationskliniken Ulm, Ulm, Germany; Volker Puetz, MD:Universitätsklinikum Dresden, Dresden, Germany; Ulf Bodechtel, MD:Universitätsklinikum Dresden, Dresden, Germany; Claus. Z. Simonsen, PhD:Aarhus Universitetshospital, Aarhus, Denmark; Leif Ostergaard, PhD:Aarhus Universitetshospital, Aarhus, Denmark; Anette Møller, PhD:Aarhus Universitetshospital, Aarhus, Denmark; Dorte Damgaard, PhD:Aarhus Universitetshospital, Aarhus, Denmark; Kristina Hougaard Dupont, PhD:Aarhus Universitetshospital, Aarhus, Denmark; Marika Poulsen, MD:Aarhus Universitetshospital, Aarhus, Denmark; Niels Hjort, PhD:Aarhus Universitetshospital, Aarhus, Denmark; Noelia Ruiz de Morales, MD:Aarhus Universitetshospital,

Aarhus, Denmark; Paul von Weitzel, PhD:Aarhus Universitetshospital, Aarhus, Denmark; Thomas Harbo, PhD:Aarhus Universitetshospital, Aarhus, Denmark; Jacob Marstrand, PhD:Bispebjerg Hospital, Copenhagen, Denmark; Andreas Hansen, MD:Bispebjerg Hospital, Copenhagen, Denmark; Hanne Christensen, PhD:Bispebjerg Hospital, Copenhagen, Denmark; Karen Aegidius, PhD:Bispebjerg Hospital, Copenhagen, Denmark; Lise Jeppesen, MD:Bispebjerg Hospital, Copenhagen, Denmark; Per Meden:Bispebjerg Hospital, Copenhagen, Denmark; Sverre Rosenbaum, PhD:Bispebjerg Hospital, Copenhagen, Denmark; Helle Iversen, MD:Glostrup Hospital, Glostrup, Denmark; Christina Back :Glostrup Hospital, Glostrup, Denmark; Jakob Hansen, PhD; Lene Michelsen, MD:Glostrup Hospital, Glostrup, Denmark; Thomas Truelsen, MD:Glostrup Hospital, Glostrup, Denmark; Boris Modrau, MD:Aalborg Sygehus, Syd, Aalborg, Denmark; Bo Kristensen:Aalborg Sygehus, Syd, Aalborg, Denmark; Karsten Vestergaard, MD:Aalborg Sygehus, Syd, Aalborg, Denmark; Lorenz Oppel, MD:Aalborg Sygehus, Syd, Aalborg, Denmark; Anke Wouters, PhD:UZ Leuven, Leuven, Belgium; Bart Swinnen, MD:UZ Leuven, Leuven, Belgium; Ide Smets:UZ Leuven, Leuven, Belgium; Jelle Demeestere:UZ Leuven, Leuven, Belgium; Laurens Dobbels:UZ Leuven, Leuven, Belgium; Raf Brouns, PhD:UZ Brussels, Brussels, Belgium; Ann De Smedt, PhD:UZ Brussels, Brussels, Belgium; Jacques DeKeyser:UZ Brussels, Brussels, Belgium; Laetitia Yperzele:UZ Brussels, Brussels, Belgium; Robbert-Jan Van Hooff, PhD:UZ Brussels, Brussels, Belgium; Andre Peeters, MD:UCL Saint Luc, Woluwe-Saint-Lambert, Belgium; Anne Dusart, MD:UCL Saint Luc, Woluwe-Saint-Lambert, Belgium; Ana Etxeberria:UCL Saint Luc, Woluwe-Saint-Lambert, Belgium; Bernard Hanseeuw, PhD:UCL Saint Luc, Woluwe-Saint-Lambert, Belgium; Frederic London, MD:UCL Saint Luc, Woluwe-Saint-Lambert, Belgium; Jonathan Leempoel, MD:UCL Saint Luc, Woluwe-Saint-Lambert, Belgium; Katharina Hohenbichler:UCL Saint Luc, Woluwe-Saint-Lambert, Belgium; Nadia Younan, MD:UCL Saint Luc, Woluwe-Saint-Lambert, Belgium; Vicky Maqueda, MD:UCL Saint Luc, Woluwe-Saint-Lambert, Belgium; Patrice Laloux, PhD:UCL Mont Godinne, Yvoir, Belgium; Beatrijs De Coene, MD:UCL Mont Godinne, Yvoir, Belgium; Charlotte De Maesse-neire, MD:UCL Mont Godinne, Yvoir, Belgium; Gaetane Turine:UCL Mont Godinne, Yvoir, Belgium; Yves Vandermeeren, PhD:UCL Mont Godinne, Yvoir, Belgium; Nina De Klippel, MD:Virga Jesse Hasselt, Hasselt, Belgium; Chris Willems, MD:Virga Jesse Hasselt, Hasselt, Belgium; Isabel de Hollander, MD:Virga Jesse Hasselt, Hasselt, Belgium; Peter Soors, MD:Virga Jesse Hasselt, Hasselt, Belgium; Sylvia Hermans, MD:Virga Jesse Hasselt, Hasselt, Belgium; Dimitri Hemelsoet, MD:UZ Ghent, Ghent, Belgium; Philippe Desfontaines, MD:Centre Hospitalier Chrétien, Liège, Belgium; Peter Vanacker, PhD:AZ Sint Lucas Brugge, Brugge, Belgium; Matthieu Rutgers, MD:Clinique de l'Europe, Brussels, Belgium; Charlotte Druart, MD:Clinique de l'Europe, Brussels, Belgium; Perrine Paindeville:Clinique de l'Europe, Brussels, Belgium; Dirk Peeters, MD:AZ Groeninge, Kortrijk, Belgium; Bart Bruneel, MD:AZ Groeninge, Kortrijk, Belgium; Evelien Vancaester, MD:AZ Groeninge, Kortrijk, Belgium; Frederik Vanhee, MD:AZ Groeninge, Kortrijk, Belgium; Guy Meersman, MD:AZ Groeninge, Kortrijk, Belgium; Paul Bourgeois, MD:AZ Groeninge, Kortrijk, Belgium; Patrick Vanderdonck, MD:AZ Groeninge, Kortrijk, Belgium; Amandine Benoit, MD:Hôpital Neurologique, Lyon, France; Laurent Derex, MD:Hôpital Neurologique, Lyon, France; Laura Mechthouff, MD:Hôpital Neurologique, Lyon, France; Nadia Berhoune, MD:Hôpital Neurologique, Lyon, France; Thomas Ritzenthaler, PhD:Hôpital Neurologique, Lyon, France; Pierre Amarenco, MD:Hôpital Bichat Claude Bernard, Paris, France; Cristina Hobeau, MD:Hôpital Bichat Claude Bernard, Paris, France; Elena Meseguer Gancedo, MD:Hôpital Bichat Claude Bernard, Paris, France; David Calvet, PhD:Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne, Paris, France; Alexandre Ladoux, MD:Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne, Paris, France; Alexandre Machet:Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne, Paris, France; Catherine Lamy, MD:Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne,

Paris, France; Charles Mellerio, PhD:Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne, Paris, France; Catherine Oppenheim, PhD:Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne, Paris, France; Christine Rodriguez-Regent, MD:Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne, Paris, France; Eric Bodiguel, MD:Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne, Paris, France; Guillaume Turc, PhD:Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne, Paris, France; Julia Birchenall, MD:Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne, Paris, France; Laurence Legrand, MD:Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne, Paris, France; Ludovic Morin, MD:Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne, Paris, France; Myriam Edjali-Goujon, MD:Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne, Paris, France; Oliver Naggara, PhD:Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne, Paris, France; Soulliard Raphaëlle:Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne, Paris, France; Sylvie Godon-Hardy, MD:Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne, Paris, France; Valérie Domigo, MD:Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne, Paris, France; Vincent Guiraud, MD:Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne, Paris, France; Yves Samson, PhD:Groupement Hospitalier Pitié Salpêtrière, Paris, France; Anne Leger, MD:Groupement Hospitalier Pitié Salpêtrière, Paris, France; Charlotte Rosso, PhD:Groupement Hospitalier Pitié Salpêtrière, Paris, France; Flore Baronnet-Chauvet, MD:Groupement Hospitalier Pitié Salpêtrière, Paris, France; Sophie Crozier, MD:Groupement Hospitalier Pitié Salpêtrière, Paris, France; Sandrine Deltour, MD:Groupement Hospitalier Pitié Salpêtrière, Paris, France; Marion Yger, MD:Groupement Hospitalier Pitié Salpêtrière, Paris, France; Igor Sibon, PhD:CHU de Bordeaux/Hôpital Pellegrin, Bordeaux, France; Pauline Renou, MD:CHU de Bordeaux/Hôpital Pellegrin, Bordeaux, France; Sharmilla Sagnier, MD:CHU de Bordeaux/Hôpital Pellegrin, Bordeaux, France; Mathieu Zuber, MD:Hôpital Paris Saint-Joseph, Paris, France; Ruben Tamazyan:Hôpital Paris Saint-Joseph, Paris, France; Gilles Rodier, MD:Centre Hospitalier de la Région d'Annecy, Metz-Tessy, France; Nathalie Morel, MD:Centre Hospitalier de la Région d'Annecy, Metz-Tessy, France; Sandra Felix:Centre Hospitalier de la Région d'Annecy, Metz-Tessy, France; Wilfried Vadot, MD:Centre Hospitalier de la Région d'Annecy, Metz-Tessy, France; Valerie Wolff, PhD:Hôpital Hautepierre, Strasbourg, France; Adriana Aniculaesei, MD:Hôpital Hautepierre, Strasbourg, France; Bertrand Yalo, MD:Hôpital Hautepierre, Strasbourg, France; Daniela Bindila:Hôpital Hautepierre, Strasbourg, France; Veronique Quenardelle, MD:Hôpital Hautepierre, Strasbourg, France; Karine Blanc-Lasserre, MD:Centre Hospitalier de Valence, Valence, France; Emmanuelle Landrault, MD:Centre Hospitalier de Valence, Valence, France; Ludovic Breynaert, MD:Centre Hospitalier de Valence, Valence, France; Serkan Cakmak, MD:Hôpital Nord Ouest – Villefranche sur Saône, Gleize, France; Stéphane Peysson, MD:Hôpital Nord Ouest – Villefranche sur Saône, Gleize, France; Alain Viguier, MD:Centre d'Investigation Clinique, Toulouse, France; Claire Lebel:Centre d'Investigation Clinique, Toulouse, France; Nicolas Raposo, MD:Centre d'Investigation Clinique, Toulouse, France; Anne-Evelyne Vallet, MD:Centre Hospitalier de Vienne, Vienne, France; Pauline Vallet, MD:Centre Hospitalier de Vienne, Vienne, France; Sébastien Brugirard, MD:Centre Hospitalier de Vienne, Vienne, France; Bharath Cheripelli:University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK; Dheeraj Kalladka, MD:University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK; Fiona Moreton, MD:University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK; Krishna Dani, MD:University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK; Salwa El Tawil, MD:University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK; Sankaranarayanan Ramachandran, MD:University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK; Xuya Huang, MD:University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK; Elisabeth Warburton, MD:University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK; Nicholas Evans, MD:University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK; Richard Perry, MD:University College London, London, UK; Bhavni Patel, MD:St. George's Hospital London, London, UK; Geoffrey Cloud, MD:St. George's Hospital London, London, UK; Anthony Pereira, MD:St. George's Hospital London, London, UK; Barry Moynihan, MD:St. George's Hospital London, London, UK; Caroline Lovelock, MD:St. George's Hospital London, London, UK; Lillian Choy, MD:St. George's Hospital London, London, UK; Usman Khan, MD:St.

George's Hospital London, London, UK; Christine Roffe, MD:North Staffordshire Hospital, Stafford, UK; Pippa Tyrell, MD:Salford Royal Hospital, Salford, UK; Craig Smith, MD:Salford Royal Hospital, Salford, UK; Anand Dixit, MD:Freeman Hospital, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK; Stephen Louw, MD:Freeman Hospital, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK; David Broughton, MD:James Cook University Hospital, Middlesbrough; Ashit Shetty, MD:Nottingham City Hospital, Nottingham, UK; Jason Appleton:Nottingham City Hospital, Nottingham, UK; Nikola Sprigg :Nottingham City Hospital, Nottingham, UK; Boris Raul Acosta, MD:Hospital Universitario Doctor Josep Trueta, Girona, Spain; Cecile van Eendenburg:Hospital Universitario Doctor Josep Trueta, Girona, Spain; Joaquin Serena Leal, PhD:Hospital Universitario Doctor Josep Trueta, Girona, Spain; Maria del Mar Castellanos Rodrigo:Hospital Universitario Doctor Josep Trueta, Girona, Spain; Mikel Terceno Izaga:Hospital Universitario Doctor Josep Trueta, Girona, Spain; Olga Belchí Guillaumon:Hospital Universitario Doctor Josep Trueta, Girona, Spain; Juan Arenillas, PhD:Hospital Clínico Universitario de Valladolid, Valladolid, Spain; Ana Calleja, MD:Hospital Clínico Universitario de Valladolid, Valladolid, Spain; Elisa Cortijo, MD:Hospital Clínico Universitario de Valladolid, Valladolid, Spain; Patricia Mulero, MD:Hospital Clínico Universitario de Valladolid, Valladolid, Spain; Natalia Pérez de la Ossa, PhD:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; Alicia Garrido, MD:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; Alicia Martinez, MD:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; Carlos García Esperón, MD:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; Cristina Guerrero:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; David Carrera:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; Dolores Vilas, MD:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; Elena Lopez-cancio, PhD:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; Ernest Palomeras, MD:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; Giuseppe Lucente, MD:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; Meritxell Gomis, PhD:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; Irina Isern:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; Juan L. Becerra:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; Jose Hervas Vicente:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; Josep Sánchez, MD:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; Laura Dorado, PhD:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; Laia Grau:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; Lourdes Ispuerto, MD:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; Luis Prats, MD:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; Miriam Almendrote, MD:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; María Hernández, PhD:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; Marta Jimenez, MD:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; Manuel Lozano Sánchez:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; Monica Millán Torne:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; Silvia Presas, MD:Trias i Pujol University Hospital, Barcelona, Spain; Xavier Ustrell, MD:Hospital Universitari de Tarragona Joan XXIII, Tarragona, Spain; Anna Pellisé, MD:Hospital Universitari de Tarragona Joan XXIII, Tarragona, Spain; Irene Navalpotro, MD:Hospital Universitari de Tarragona Joan XXIII, Tarragona, Spain; Alain Luna, MD:Hospital Universitario de Cruces de Baracaldo, Bilbao, Spain; Wouter Schonewille, MD:VCMO - Sint Antonius Ziekenhuis, Utrecht, Netherlands; Paul Nederkoorn, PhD:Academisch Medisch Centrum, Amsterdam, Netherlands; Charles Majoie, PhD:Academisch Medisch Centrum, Amsterdam, Netherlands; Lucie van den Berg:Academisch Medisch Centrum, Amsterdam, Netherlands; Sophie van den Berg:Academisch Medisch Centrum, Amsterdam, Netherlands; Thomas Zonneveld:Academisch Medisch Centrum, Amsterdam, Netherlands; Michel Remmers, MD:Amphia Ziekenhuis, Breda, Netherlands; Franz Fazekas, MD:Medizinische Universität Graz, Graz, Austria; Alexander Pichler, PhD:Medizinische Universität Graz, Graz, Austria; Simon Fandler, MD:Medizinische Universität Graz, Graz, Austria; Thomas Gattringer, PhD:Medizinische Universität Graz, Graz, Austria; Johannes Mutzenbach,

MD:Christian-Doppler-Klinik, Paracelsus Medizinische Privatuniversität Salzburg, Salzburg, Austria; Jörg Weber, MD:Klinikum Klagenfurt am Wörthersee, Klagenfurt am Wörthersee, Austria; Elmar Höfner, MD:Klinikum Klagenfurt am Wörthersee, Klagenfurt am Wörthersee, Austria; Heinz Kohlfürst, MD:Klinikum Klagenfurt am Wörthersee, Klagenfurt am Wörthersee, Austria; Karin Weinstich, MD:Klinikum Klagenfurt am Wörthersee, Klagenfurt am Wörthersee, Austria; Lars Kellert, MD:Klinikum der Universität München, München, Germany; Anna Bayer-Karpinska, MD:Klinikum der Universität München, München, Germany; Christian Opherk, MD:Klinikum der Universität München, München, Germany; Frank Wollenweber, MD:Klinikum der Universität München, München, Germany; Matthias Klein, MD:Klinikum der Universität München, München, Germany; Tobias Neumann-Haefelin, MD:Klinikum Fulda, Fulda, Germany; Alexandra Pierskalla, MD:Klinikum Fulda, Fulda, Germany; Andreas Harloff, MD:Freiburger Universitätsklinik, Freiburg, Germany; Jürgen Bardutzky, MD:Freiburger Universitätsklinik, Freiburg, Germany; Florian Buggle, MD:Klinikum der Stadt Ludwigshafen am Rhein, Ludwigshafen am Rhein, Germany; Jörg von Schrader, MD:Klinikum der Stadt Ludwigshafen am Rhein, Ludwigshafen am Rhein, Germany; Rainer Kollmar, MD:Klinikum Darmstadt, Darmstadt, Germany; Josef Schill, MD:Klinikum Darmstadt, Darmstadt, Germany; Anna-Mareike Löbbe:Klinikum Darmstadt, Darmstadt, Germany; Thierry Moulin, PhD:Hôpital Jean Minjoz, Besançon, France; Benjamin Bouamra:Hôpital Jean Minjoz, Besançon, France; Louise Bonnet, MD:Hôpital Jean Minjoz, Besançon, France; Emmanuel Touzé, PhD:CHU de Caen, Caen, France; Anne-Laure Bonnet, MD:CHU de Caen, Caen, France; Julien Cogez, MD:CHU de Caen, Caen, France; Lin Li, MD:CHU de Caen, Caen, France; Sophie Guetier, MD:CHU de Caen, Caen, France; Arindam Kar, MD:Charing Cross Hospital London, London, UK; Aravinth Sivagnanaratham:Charing Cross Hospital London, London, UK; Olivia Geraghty, MD:Charing Cross Hospital London, London, UK; Urszula Bojaryn:Charing Cross Hospital London, London, UK; Arumugam Nallasivan, MD:Countess Of Chester Hospital, Chester, UK; Miguel Blanco Gonzales, MD:Hospital Clínico Universitario, Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, Santiago, Spain; Manuel Rodríguez-Yáñez, PhD:Hospital Clínico Universitario, Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, Santiago, Spain; Jose Tembl:Hospital Universitario y Politécnico de La Fe de Valencia, Valencia, Spain; David Gorriz:Hospital Universitario y Politécnico de La Fe de Valencia, Valencia, Spain; Stefan Oberndorfer, MD:Universitätsklinikum St. Pölten, St. Pölten, Austria; Elisabeth Prohaska, MD:Universitätsklinikum St. Pölten, St. Pölten, Austria. They are all site investigators. All the members are contributed to patient recruitment and on-site trial management.

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Ethical approval This is an exploratory analysis of the WAKE-UP trial (Efficacy and Safety of MRI-Based Thrombolysis in Wake-Up Stroke, ClinicalTrials.gov: NCT01525290). [3] For each study site, the trial was approved by the national or local ethics committee or institutional review board, as described previously [3, 4]. Patients or their legal representatives provided written informed consent according to national and local regulations with an exception from explicit informed consent in emergency circumstances in some countries [3, 4].

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