2010 Update of the international ASAS recommendations for the use of anti-TNF agents in patients with axial spondyloarthritis

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ABSTRACT
This paper presents the second update of the Assessment in SpondyloArthritis international Society (ASAS) consensus statement on the use of anti-tumour necrosis factor (anti-TNF) agents in patients with axial spondyloarthritis (SpA). A major change from the previous recommendations is that patients fulfilling the ASAS axial SpA criteria, which also include patients fulfilling the modified New York criteria for ankylosing spondylitis, can be treated with anti-TNF agents. This makes an earlier start in the disease process possible. A second major change is the mandatory pretreatment before anti-TNF agents can be started. All patients should have tried a minimum of two non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs for a minimum of 4 weeks in total. This is significantly shorter than the previous requirement of 3 months. As previously, patients with axial symptoms require no further pretreatment. Patients with symptomatic peripheral symptoms should normally have had an adequate therapeutic trial of a disease-modifying antirheumatic drug, preferably sulfasalazine. Sulfasalazine is no longer mandatory in this group of patients. Finally, efficacy should be evaluated after at least 12 weeks. The remaining recommendations stayed largely unchanged.

INTRODUCTION
In 2008 a consensus statement on the use of anti-tumour necrosis factor (anti-TNF) agents was published by the Assessment in SpondyloArthritis international Society (ASAS).1 This was followed by an update in 2006.2 In 2009 a second update was undertaken to include new developments in the field. Since the field is rapidly moving, the recommendations need to be updated regularly. Together with the update of the ASAS/EULAR recommendations for the management of ankylosing spondylitis (AS), an update of the recommendations for the use of anti-TNF agents was performed.3

METHODS
The manuscript of the first update served as the basis for this second update. The following information was collected: (1) data from the literature on the management of AS since the 2006 update; (2) data from a survey of 1242 rheumatologists from 18 countries; (3) national guidelines in 23 countries. The detailed information on the survey is published as an appendix to this paper (supplementary online appendix); the other two—data from the literature and national guidelines—will be published separately. All this information was presented to the members of ASAS during the annual workshop in Rome in January 2009 and the ASAS workshop in June 2009 in Copenhagen. Each recommendation was presented with the relevant information from the three sources mentioned above. Thereafter there was an open discussion, followed by voting on the question if a change was needed. If there was a majority vote that a change was needed, new concepts and new wording were discussed and proposed for voting. Wording was changed until a majority was in favour of that specific wording. As with the previous consensus document, the recommendations from the Appraisal of Guidelines Research and Evaluation instrument were followed.4

RESULTS
Table 1 compares the 2006 recommendations with the recommendations from this update. The changes are highlighted. Table 2 presents the 2010 recommendations.

Diagnosis
The existing recommendation was to treat patients ‘normally’ fulfilling the modified New York criteria.3 Answers to the questionnaire, however, showed that practising rheumatologists considered this to be a barrier (supplementary online appendix). More than 60% of the respondents would like the option to diagnose AS according to MRI findings. This was largely echoed by the ASAS membership: 94% voted in support of the option to use MRI and/or CT as an imaging method. In a follow-up question, 81% voted for the ASAS axial spondyloarthritis (SpA) criteria as additional criteria for making the diagnosis of SpA. In fact, all patients fulfilling the modified New York criteria for AS will also fulfil the ASAS criteria for axial SpA. Nevertheless, it was felt clearer, at least for the time being, to keep both the modified New York criteria as well as the ASAS axial SpA criteria in the recommendation for diagnosis. One of the main reasons for this large support to open the option to treat patients with axial SpA not fulfilling the modified New York criteria is that this is mainly seen as an early stage of the same disease spectrum.7 And importantly, it has been shown that patients with axial SpA not fulfilling the modified New York criteria have similar burden of disease as patients fulfilling these
Table 1 Changes between the first and second update of the recommendations for the use of anti-tumour necrosis factor agents in patients with ankylosing spondylitis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparison of first and second update of recommendations; changes highlighted in italic bold</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2006 Update recommendations</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Diagnosis</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Active disease</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Active disease for ≥4 weeks</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>BASDAI:≥ 0 (0–10) and positive expert opinion</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Treatment failure</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All patients: should have had adequate therapeutic trials of at least two NSAIDs; defined as for at least 3 months at maximum recommended dose unless contraindicated:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Axial disease:</strong> no pretreatment with DMARDs required</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Peripheral arthritis:</strong> one local corticosteroid injection if appropriate; therapeutic trial of sulphasalazine (4 months maximum tolerated dose) mandatory</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Enthesitis:</strong> appropriate local treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contraindications</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment of disease</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ASAS core set for daily practice and BASDAI</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>50% Improvement in BASDAI or absolute change of 2 (0–10) and positive expert opinion in favour of continuation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment between 6 and 12 weeks</strong></td>
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ASAS, Assessment in SpondyloArthritis international Society; BASDAI, Bath Ankylosing Spondylitis Disease Activity Index; DMARD, disease-modifying antirheumatic drug; NSAID, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug; SpA, spondyloarthritis.

Table 2 2010 Update of recommendations for the use of anti-tumour necrosis factor agents in patients with axial SpA (including AS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Patient selection</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Diagnosis</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Active disease</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BASDAI ≥ 4 (0–10)² and a positive expert opinion³</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Treatment failure</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Patients with predominantly axial manifestations do not have to take DMARDs before anti-TNF treatment can be started</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Patients with symptomatic peripheral arthritis</strong> should have an insufficient response to at least one local steroid injection if appropriate and should normally have had a therapeutic trial of a DMARD, preferably sulphasalazine;</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Patients with symptomatic enthesitis</strong> must have failed appropriate local treatment;</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment of disease</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment of response</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Responder criteria</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time of evaluation</strong></td>
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*Modified New York criteria (van der Linden et al, 1984): Radiological criterion (sacroilitis, grade ≥II bilaterally or grade III to IV unilaterally) and at least two out of three clinical criteria (low back pain and stiffness for more than 3 months that improves with exercise but is not relieved by rest; limitation of motion of the lumbar spine in both the sagittal and frontal planes; limitation of chest expansion relative to normal values correlated for age and sex). ⁵ ⁶
²See figure 1 for the ASAS axial SpA criteria. ⁹
³BASDAI assessed on a 0–10 VAS or NRS. ¹⁴
⁴The expert is a doctor, usually a rheumatologist, with expertise in inflammatory back pain and the use of biological agents. Experts should be locally defined. An expert opinion should consider clinical features (history and examination) as well as either serum acute phase reactant levels or imaging results, such as radiographs demonstrating rapid progression or MRI scans indicating inflammation. ³
⁵ASAS core set for daily practice: physical function (BASFI); Pain (VAS/NRS, last week, spine at night, due to AS and VAS/ NRS, last week, spine due to AS); spinal mobility (chest expansion, cervical rotation, occiput-to-wall distance, modified Schober, and (lateral lumbar flexion or BASMI); patient’s global assessment (VAS/NRS, last week); stiffness (duration of morning stiffness, spine, VAS/NRS, last week); peripheral joints and entheses (number of swollen joints (44 joints count); enthesis score such as developed in Maastricht, Berlin or San Francisco); acute phase reactants (preferably CRP); fatigue (VAS/NRS). AS, ankylosing spondylitis; ASAS, Assessment in SpondyloArthritis international Society; BASDAI, Bath Ankylosing Spondylitis Disease Activity Index; BASFI, Bath Ankylosing Spondylitis Functional Index; BASMI, Bath Ankylosing Spondylitis Metrology Index; CRP C-reactive protein; DMARD, disease-modifying antirheumatic drug; NRS, numerical rating scale; NSAID, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug; SpA, spondyloarthritis; TNF, tumour necrosis factor; VAS, visual analogue scale.
ASAS classification criteria for Axial SpA

In patients with ≥3 months back pain and age at onset <45 years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sacroiliitis on imaging* plus</th>
<th>OR</th>
<th>HLA-B27 plus</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>≥1 SpA feature</td>
<td></td>
<td>≥2 other SpA features</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#SpA features
- Inflammatory back pain
- Arthritis
- Enthesitis (heel)
- Uveitis
- Dactylitis
- Psoriasis
- Crohn’s/collitis
- Good response to NSAIDs
- Family history for spa
- HLA-B27
- Elevated CRP

Figure 1 ASAS classification criteria for axial spondyloarthritis (SpA). CRP, C-reactive protein; NSAIDs, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs.

Criteria. Finally, studies with TNF blockers in patients with axial SpA show at least similar efficacy to, and, in part, clearly better efficacy than, studies in patients fulfilling modified New York criteria.

Active disease
Eighty-six per cent of the respondents to the questionnaire agreed conceptually with the choice of the criteria to define active disease (a score of ≥7 on a 0–10 scale). Among the ASAS membership, 78% voted to keep the criteria unchanged, which was the final decision for this recommendation.

Previous treatment
Seventy-six per cent of the ASAS membership voted to change the recommendation on the specifics of pretreatment before a patient may start a TNF blocker. First, the use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) was discussed. A total of 76% of the membership wanted to change the recommendation as follows: keep the minimum number of NSAIDs that have been tried from 7.9 to 9.8, it was apparent that rheumatologists use a variety of contraindications that differ from the previously recommended list. Moreover, as the current recommendations for AS are updated only every few years, these are not the best place in which to keep up to date on new safety concerns. Finally, most safety issues are not specific for AS. Therefore, it is recommended that the annually updated consensus statement on the use of biological agents should be consulted.

Contraindications
In the previous recommendations, a list of contraindications was included. In this update it was decided to leave this out, but refer to the previous consensus statement for AS and to general recommendations. The main reason is that there are only a limited number of absolute contraindications, but in most situations extra care needs to be taken in relation to comorbidity, concurrent (prophylactic) medication and monitoring. Although there was a high level of agreement with the individual contraindications (ranging from 7.9 to 9.8), it was apparent that rheumatologists use a variety of contraindications that differ from those listed (confirmed by 27% of the rheumatologists) and do not always apply the contraindications from the list. Also the national recommendations provide a wide range of contraindications that differ from the previously recommended list. Moreover, as the current recommendations for AS are updated only every few years, these are not the best place in which to keep up to date on new safety concerns.
Assessment of disease

No change was suggested for how to assess disease activity and severity. This should still be based on the measures included in the ASAS core set for daily practice and the Bath Ankylosing Spondylitis Disease Activity Index.14 15

Assessment of response

The assessment of response was not changed. However, the time of evaluation was lengthened from between 6 and 12 weeks previously to beyond 12 weeks. In phase III trials of anti-TNF agents treatment response rates plateau from 12 weeks onwards and so the evidence favours at least 12 weeks of continuous treatment before deciding on the desirability of continuing treatment.

DISCUSSION

This is the second update of the international consensus statement of the use of anti-TNF agents in AS. Although the majority of the recommendations remain largely unchanged, the suggested changes have major implications. The first and most important change is that from now on patients who fulfil the ASAS axial SpA criteria can also be treated with anti-TNF agents according to these recommendations. This means that patients with changes in the sacroiliac joints on MRI but not fulfilling the grading of the sacroiliac joints on radiographs (‘non-radiographic axial SpA’ vs ‘radiographic axial SpA’) satisfy the criteria for the start of a TNF blocker. This will make an earlier start of anti-TNF treatment in the disease course possible. As the burden of the disease is similar between patients with non-radiographic and radiographic axial SpA, and the efficacy of anti-TNF treatment is at least similar, this is a logical step. Anti-TNF agents do not inhibit the progression of syndesmophytes in patients with established AS over a 2-year period.16–18 Long-term evaluation should prove if this earlier start will also have a positive effect on progression of structural damage and prevention of long-term disability.

A second major change is in the specifics of the required pretreatment: an insufficient response to at least two NSAIDs during a total 4-week period is satisfactory to fulfil the NSAID pretreatment requirement. Moreover, in patients with predominantly peripheral disease, treatment with sulfasalazine is no longer considered mandatory.

Finally, the treatment period should be at least 12 weeks before the success or otherwise of the anti-TNF therapy is judged. Altogether, these recommendations provide an option for using anti-TNF treatment on a wider scale. This is supported by new developments over the past few years. Among these are the options to make an earlier diagnosis by the ASAS axial SpA criteria, and the effectiveness and safety of anti-TNF treatment in this patient population. We hope that these international recommendations will again form the basis for national recommendations and achieve widespread implementation.

Acknowledgements The authors thank all ASAS members for their active participation in questionnaires and meetings. A complete list of all ASAS members can be found on www.asas-group.org. They also thank the Ps of the countries that participated in the questionnaire on the level of agreement with the 2006 recommendations as well as all rheumatologists responding to the questionnaire.

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Competing interests DvdH has received honoraria from Abbott, Amgen, AstraZeneca, BMS, Centocor, Chugai, Eli-Lilly, GSK, Merck, Novartis, Otsuka, Pfizer, Roche, Sanofi-Aventis, Schering-Plough, UCB, Wyeth; JS has received honoraria and research support from Abbott, Merck, Centocor, Pfizer, UCB; MD has received consultancy fees and research grants from Pfizer; Abbott, Sanofi-Aventis, BMS, UCB; RB has received honoraria from Abbott, BMS, Merck, Pfizer, Roche; WM Abbott, Centocor, Pfizer, Schering-Plough, Wyeth; RL has received honoraria from Amgen, Abbott, Centocor, Celltech, Glaxo-Smith-Kline, Merck (incl Schering-Plough), Pfizer (incl Wyeth); UCB; MR has received honoraria from Abbott, Centocor, BMS, MSD, Pfizer, Roche, UCB; JB has received honoraria and grants from Abbott, Amgen, BMS, Celgene, Celltrion, Centocor, MSD (Schering-Plough), Novartis, Pfizer (Wyeth), Roche, Sanofi-Aventis and UCB.

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