

Levosimendan in septic shock in patients with elevated cardiac biomarkers – a subgroup analysis of the LeoPARDS randomised trial.

Running Title: *Levosimendan in septic shock with cardiac dysfunction*

David B Antcliffe^a, Shalini Santhakumaran^b, Robert M L Orme^c, Josie K Ward^a, Farah Al-Beidh^a, Kieran O’Dea^a, Gavin D Perkins^d, Mervyn Singer^e, Daniel F McAuley^f, Alexina J Mason^g, Mary Cross^b, Deborah Ashby^b, Anthony C Gordon^{a*}.

^a Section of Anaesthetics, Pain Medicine and Intensive Care Medicine, Dept of Surgery and Cancer, Imperial College London and Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, London, UK

^b Imperial Clinical Trials Unit, Imperial College London, London, UK

^c Department of Critical Care, Cheltenham General Hospital, Cheltenham, UK

^d Warwick Clinical Trials Unit, Warwick Medical School, University of Warwick and University Hospitals Birmingham, UK

^e Bloomsbury Institute of Intensive Care Medicine, University College London, London, UK

^f Wellcome-Wolfson Institute for Experimental Medicine, School of Medicine, Dentistry and Biomedical Sciences, Queen’s University Belfast, and Regional Intensive Care Unit, Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast, Northern Ireland, UK

^g Department of Health Services Research and Policy, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, London, UK

Corresponding Author:

Prof Anthony Gordon

Intensive Care Unit, Imperial College / St Mary’s Hospital, Praed Street, London. W2 1NY

E-mail: anthony.gordon@imperial.ac.uk

Telephone: +44 20 3312 6328

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Take Home Message

In adult patients with septic shock, adding levosimendan to standard care is not associated with improvement in organ dysfunction nor lower mortality in patients with biochemical evidence of cardiac dysfunction. There is also no evidence to support any potential beneficial immunological effects of levosimendan in sepsis.

Tweet

Levosimendan has no benefit on organ dysfunction or mortality in patients with sepsis and biochemical evidence of cardiac dysfunction

Abstract

Purpose: Myocardial dysfunction is common in sepsis but optimal treatment strategies are unclear. The inodilator, levosimendan was suggested as a possible therapy, however the Levosimendan to Prevent Acute Organ Dysfunction in Sepsis (LeoPARDS) trial found no benefit in reducing organ dysfunction in septic shock. In this pre-specified analysis, we evaluated the effects of levosimendan in patients with and without biochemical cardiac dysfunction, and examined its non-inotropic effects.

Methods: Two cardiac biomarkers, troponin I (cTnI) and N-terminal prohormone of brain natriuretic peptide (NT-proBNP), and five inflammatory mediators were measured in plasma from patients recruited to the LeoPARDS trial at baseline and over the first 6 days. Mean total Sequential Organ Failure Assessment (SOFA) score and 28-day mortality were compared between patients with normal and raised cTnI and NT-proBNP values, and between patients above and below median values.

Results: Levosimendan produced no benefit in SOFA score or 28-day mortality in patients with cardiac dysfunction. There was a statistically significant treatment effect by subgroup interaction ($p=0.04$) in patients with NT-proBNP above or below the median value. Those with NT-proBNP values above the median receiving levosimendan had higher SOFA scores than those receiving placebo (mean daily total SOFA score 7.6 (4.4) vs 6.1 (3.9), mean difference 1.6, 95%CI 0.4-2.7). Levosimendan had no effect on the rate of decline of inflammatory biomarkers.

Conclusion: Adding levosimendan to standard care in septic shock was not associated with less severe organ dysfunction nor lower mortality in patients with biochemical evidence of cardiac dysfunction.

Key Words:

Septic shock

Levosimendan

Troponin

CTnl

N-terminal prohormone of brain natriuretic peptide

Inflammation

Introduction

Fluid therapy and catecholamine vasopressors are first-line treatments recommended by the Surviving Sepsis Campaign for the management of septic shock [1]. However, myocardial dysfunction is increasingly recognised in sepsis [2–5] and it is unclear how this should be best treated. Dobutamine is recommended as an inotropic agent [1] but there is concern about the association of beta-adrenergic agonists with an increased risk of myocardial injury and other deleterious effects [6–8].

Recently, the Levosimendan for the Prevention of Acute Organ Dysfunction in Sepsis (LeoPARDS) trial [9] investigated the use of levosimendan in septic shock. Levosimendan is a calcium sensitising drug with positively inotropic and vasodilating properties that increases cardiac output without increasing myocardial oxygen demand [10]. Levosimendan also has other properties including anti-inflammatory, anti-oxidant and anti-apoptotic effects [11–13] which may also be beneficial in sepsis. The LeoPARDS trial, however, found that addition of levosimendan to standard treatment in adults with septic shock did not result in less severe organ dysfunction nor lower mortality [9]. However, as this trial recruited a wide range of patients with septic shock, it has been suggested that the lack of benefit was because not all patients had cardiac dysfunction [14]. Although the original trial found no benefit of levosimendan in a subgroup of patients with measured low cardiac index, this group was small and prone to missing any clinically important effect. To further address any potential differences in levosimendan effect between those with and without cardiac dysfunction we performed this pre-specified subgroup analysis of the LeoPARDS trial. We examined the effects of levosimendan in patients with and without biochemical evidence of

myocardial injury and dysfunction, as indicated respectively by cardiac troponin I (cTnI) and N-terminal prohormone of brain natriuretic peptide (NT-proBNP), and also its effect on markers of inflammation.

Methods

Study Design and Sample Collection

LeoPARDS was a multicentre double-blind, placebo-controlled trial conducted in 34 Intensive Care Units (ICUs) in the United Kingdom between January 2014 and December 2015. Full details of the trial protocol and the primary analysis, have been published previously [9, 15]. A full trial report was published by the funder and this manuscript includes a subset of results from this report [16]. The trial was approved by the London-Harrow Research Ethics Committee (13/LO/0365) and written consent was obtained from the patients or their legal representatives.

Adult patients with septic shock who required vasopressors for at least 4 hours and were recruited within 24 hours of meeting inclusion criteria were eligible for entry into the study. Full details of inclusion and exclusion criteria can be found in the data supplement. 516 patients were randomised to receive either levosimendan (n=258) or placebo (n=257) in a 1:1 ratio. Patients and staff were unaware of treatment allocation throughout the trial. One patient in the levosimendan arm withdrew consent and was excluded from further analysis.

Patients received levosimendan or placebo for 24 hours in addition to standard care. Drug infusion was started at 0.1 µg/kg per minute and increased after 2-4 hours to 0.2 µg/kg per minute for the remainder of the 24 hours. No bolus dose was administered. If patients had

rate-limiting side effects, hypotension or severe tachycardia, the rate of infusion could be reduced or the drug stopped. Full details can be found in the data supplement. All other aspects of clinical care were at the discretion of the treating clinicians.

Plasma sample assay methodology

Plasma samples were collected prior to randomisation on the day of inclusion (day 1), after 24 hours (day 2), and on days 4 and 6 if the patient was still on the ICU. Samples were separated locally (spun at 1,000g for 10 mins), frozen according to standardised operating procedures, and sent to the co-ordinating centre in batches for storage and subsequent analysis. All assays were conducted blinded to treatment allocation and outcome.

Two markers of myocardial dysfunction were measured in the clinical laboratories at Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust. cTnI (cardiac troponin I) was measured in plasma samples using a high sensitivity chemiluminescent microparticle immunoassay (Abbott Architect, Abbott Diagnostics, Maidenhead, UK). cTnI is a widely used marker of myocardial injury and its elevation is associated with cardiac dysfunction and poor outcome in sepsis [17]). Serum NT-proBNP was quantified using a sandwich enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) kit (Abcam, Cambridge, UK), measured in duplicate and with the average of the two values taken. NT-proBNP is a biomarker of ventricular dysfunction in septic patients and prognosticates for poor outcomes [18, 19].

Five inflammatory biomarkers were also quantified in the collected plasma. The pro-inflammatory cytokine, interleukin 6 (IL-6) and the C-C chemokine ligand 2 (CCL2) have been previously reported to be reduced by levosimendan in sepsis [11]. Soluble tumor necrosis

factor receptor 1 (sTNFR1) and the chemokine, interleukin 8 (IL-8) are biomarkers used to characterise a hyperinflammatory phenotype in critical care; these are associated with a higher mortality and a potentially improved response to anti-inflammatory treatment [20]. The anti-inflammatory cytokine, interleukin 10 (IL-10) was also measured. IL-6, IL-8, IL-10 and CCL2 were quantified using the ELLA™ multiplex assay (ProteinSimple, San Jose, CA, USA). Samples were thawed at room temperature, diluted 3- to 8-fold and run as per the manufacturer's instructions. Positive controls of recombinant IL-6, IL-8, IL-10 and CCL2 standards were run alongside to ensure reproducibility. sTNFR1 was assessed using the ELLA Simple Plex assay (ProteinSimple). Samples were thawed at room temperature, diluted 10- to 13-fold and run as per the manufacturer's instructions alongside positive controls. The ELLA device measures the analytes in triplicate and reports the average value.

Outcomes

The primary outcome was multi-organ dysfunction as measured by the Sequential Organ Failure Assessment (SOFA) score [21]. Only used five components of the score, (cardiovascular, respiratory, renal, liver, and haematological) were used; in line with previous sepsis trials [22, 23], the neurological component was excluded due to the confounding effect of concurrent sedative drugs. The final score thus ranged from 0 to 20 for each day. Mean total SOFA score was calculated by taking the average of all SOFA scores for the duration of a patient's intensive care stay. Secondary outcomes were 28-day survival and changes in levels of cardiac and inflammatory biomarkers over the course of intensive care stay.

Statistical Analysis

All randomised patients were included in the analysis where possible, unless consent to use the data was withdrawn. For all outcomes, the primary analysis was carried out on an intention-to-treat basis. We pre-specified imputing missing values using the last observation carried forward, as the clinical expectation was that the most likely reason for a measurement not being taken was a lack of change (see Supplementary Appendix for details of the pre-specified statistical analysis plan).

Data are described using median and interquartile range (IQR) for continuous variables, and the number and percentage in each group for categorical variables. The mean total SOFA score is presented as mean and standard deviation (SD). The treatment difference was the unadjusted mean difference in the total mean SOFA score between the levosimendan and placebo arms, with a 95% confidence interval (CI). As mean SOFA score was not normally distributed, 95% confidence intervals of the mean difference were calculated with the use of bootstrapping, with the application of the percentile method with 100,000 samples.

The mean total SOFA score and 28-day mortality were analysed by pre-specified subgroups of cTnI and NT-proBNP values. The study population was split in two ways:

1. Normal compared with raised values [upper limit of normal values: 34 ng/l for cTnI (Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust) and 2000 pg/ml for NT-proBNP, according to NICE guidelines [24]]
2. Below and above the median value in the study population.

The results of subgroup analysis were displayed using forest plots and permutation tests used to test subgroup differences [25], with a p-value below 0.05 denoting statistical significance.

For all biomarkers, Bayesian hierarchical regression models were used to investigate changes in biomarker levels over time, and if trajectories differed between levosimendan and placebo-treated patients. A random intercept term was used to allow for the correlation of multiple measures per patient, with a treatment x time interaction to model differing trajectories in the treatment groups. Adjustment was made for the baseline values of the biomarker (see Supplementary Appendix).

To describe the effects of levosimendan, data were presented as: the estimated change in biomarker levels per day for levosimendan and placebo patients; the probability of a faster reduction in biomarker levels in the levosimendan group compared to the placebo group; and the estimated treatment difference on days 2, 4 and 6. All biomarkers, including baseline values, were log transformed to better comply with the assumption of normal error terms, yielding ratios for treatment differences. All analyses were performed with the use of R software, version 3.2.2 (R Project for Statistical Computing) [26] and WinBUGS version 1.4 [27].

Results

cTnI results were available for 442 (86%) patients and NT-proBNP measurements for 419 (81%) patients (Figure 1). Baseline characteristics and demographics were similar between the levosimendan and control groups (Table 1).

Cardiac Biomarkers

cTnI

Patients were divided into groups based on their cTnI results, firstly into those above or below the upper limit of normal (34 ng/l), and then above and below the median cTnI value (81 ng/l). No interaction was seen between either cTnI group and drug assignment regarding total daily SOFA score (Figure 2a). However, in those patients with a cTnI raised above normal there was a higher mean SOFA score in those receiving levosimendan compared to placebo (mean daily total SOFA 6.9 (SD 4.0) vs 5.9 (SD 3.7); mean difference 0.97 (95% CI 0.08 to 1.86)). No interaction was seen between either cTnI cut-off method and drug allocation in relation to 28-day mortality (figure 2b).

cTnI decreased over time in both arms, by 13% per day (95% credible interval [CrI] –26% to 1%) in the levosimendan arm, and by 25% (95% CrI –35% to –14%) in the placebo arm (Table 2, Figure S1 of the supplement), with a probability that cTnI decreased faster in the levosimendan arm of 8%. There was some evidence of a treatment difference only on day 6, but with wide credible intervals (52% difference, 95% CrI 1% to 219%).

NT-proBNP

As with cTnI, NT-proBNP was analysed in two ways. Firstly, by grouping patients above or below the upper limit of normal (2000 pg/ml), and then by splitting based on the median

value of 10,268 pg/ml. Although no significant interaction was seen between patients with a normal or raised NT-proBNP and treatment allocation ($p=0.30$) with respect to total daily SOFA score, there was a significant interaction when patients were split based on the median NT-proBNP ($p=0.04$) (Figure 2a). Patients with a plasma NT-proBNP level above the median level had a higher SOFA score if randomised to levosimendan (mean daily total SOFA score 7.6 (SD 4.4)), than those receiving placebo (6.1 (SD 3.9)), mean difference 1.6 (95% CI 0.4-2.7)). No difference was seen in those with NT-proBNP below the median value (Figure 2a). Although there was no statistically significant interaction between treatment allocation and NT-proBNP level on 28-day mortality, there was a suggestion that those patients with NT-proBNP values higher than the population median had a higher 28-day mortality if randomised to levosimendan (risk difference 10.50 (95% CI -2.30 to 23.29)) (Figure 2b).

NT-proBNP increased on average by 9% (95% CrI 0% to 19%) per day in the levosimendan group and decreased by 3% (95% CrI -10% to 5%) in the placebo group (Table 2, Figure S2 in the supplement). The probability that NT-proBNP decreased faster in the levosimendan arm was 3%. There was some evidence of a treatment difference on day 6 (26% difference, 95% CrI 2% to 54%) (Table 2).

Inflammatory Biomarkers

All measured inflammatory biomarkers (CCL2, IL-6, IL-8, IL-10 and sTNFr1) decreased similarly over time in both levosimendan and placebo groups (Table 3 and Figure S3 of the supplementary material). There was little evidence of a treatment difference on any day for any of the biomarkers.

Discussion

In this pre-planned sub-group analysis of the LeoPARDS trial we used the biomarkers cTnI and NT-proBNP to identify patients with evidence of myocardial injury and dysfunction, respectively. No benefit from using levosimendan was found in any subgroup classified by a variety of biomarker cut-off thresholds. Indeed, in patients with NT-proBNP levels above the median, higher SOFA scores were seen in the levosimendan group; although not statistically significant, similar trends were seen in patients with elevated cTnI. Using either biomarker there was a signal to higher 28-day mortality rates in those who had evidence of cardiac dysfunction treated with levosimendan.

Because of its action as a positive inotrope without increasing myocardial oxygen demand, levosimendan has been proposed as a potentially useful treatment in septic shock. LeoPARDS was a double-blind randomised trial comparing levosimendan to placebo in septic shock patients which found no benefit on either rates of organ dysfunction nor mortality [9]. However, because of its properties as an inodilator it was suggested that levosimendan may only have benefits in those patients with reduced cardiac output or signs of myocardial dysfunction, and the lack of benefit in the original trial related to the wide range of patients recruited, with many not having cardiac dysfunction [14]. ~~The results of this analysis suggest that not only does levosimendan fail to confer benefit to patients with impaired cardiac function but it may potentially cause harm. This is consistent with the original study analysis that found no specific benefit of levosimendan in those patients with a low cardiac index (≤ 2.44 l/minute/m²)~~ Although no specific benefit was seen with levosimendan in those patients with a low cardiac index (≤ 2.44 l/minute/m²) [9] this was a much smaller sub-group

than that reported here. The current sub-group analysis adds to the knowledge generated in the original trial by not only demonstrating that patients with biochemical evidence of cardiac dysfunction derive no benefit from levosimendan, but that in this group there were worse outcomes with levosimendan treatment.

It is not possible from the data available to fully explain why levosimendan does not benefit those patients with evidence of cardiac injury or dysfunction. Patients receiving levosimendan had higher heart rates, higher rates of supraventricular tachycardia and greater noradrenaline requirements than those receiving placebo [9]. High rates of noradrenaline infusion have been associated with poor outcomes in sepsis [6–8, 28]; it has been proposed that managing tachycardia with beta-blockade may be beneficial in septic shock [29]. It is conceivable that the harm arising from high doses of noradrenaline and tachycardia may be exaggerated in those with pre-existing myocardial damage and dysfunction.

Levosimendan also has reported extra-cardiac effects that may be beneficial in sepsis including immunomodulation with reduction in harmful levels of circulating inflammatory mediators [11, 13]. Five inflammatory biomarkers were measured in the trial population however, similar rates of decline were seen in all biomarkers in those randomised to receive levosimendan as those given placebo.

There are a number of limitations to this work. Firstly, it was a sub-group analysis based on samples collected during a multi-centre clinical trial and, as such, samples were not available for all randomised patients (mostly due to lack of research staff out of hours).

Cardiac index was only measured in 30% of patients [9], whereas biomarkers were measured in the majority of patients (>80%) allowing greater power to detect an effect of levosimendan in patients with cardiac dysfunction than in the original analysis. The conclusions drawn in this study are based on biomarker measurement and not on direct assessment of cardiac function with echocardiography. However, both cTnI [17] and BNP [18] have been demonstrated to be robust markers of cardiac injury and dysfunction in sepsis, are easily measured, and are not prone to the same degree of operator dependence as echocardiography. Importantly, all samples were collected, processed and analysed according to standardised procedures and the assays were conducted blinded to treatment allocation and outcome. Longitudinal studies of changes in biomarkers over time are always limited by those patients who either die or are discharged before the end of the study so do not have samples available for all time points. We used a robust pre-specified statistical analysis to account for missing data and to account for truncation of data. No adjustment to reported p-values was made for multiple comparisons in this study, so the results should be regarded as exploratory.

Conclusion

In adult patients with septic shock, the addition of levosimendan to standard care was not associated with improvement in organ dysfunction nor lower mortality in patients with biochemical evidence of cardiac dysfunction. In fact, patients with NT-proBNP measurements above the median value receiving levosimendan had higher SOFA scores than those receiving placebo. Similarly, there was no evidence to support any potential beneficial immunological effects of levosimendan in sepsis.

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Table 1 Baseline characteristics of patients randomised to receive levosimendan and placebo who had samples available for biomarker measurement. Continuous variables are given as median and interquartile range and categorical variables as number and percentage.

| Characteristic | Cardiac troponin I measured | | NT-proBNP measured | |
|--|-----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| | Levosimendan (n=221) | Placebo (n=221) | Levosimendan (n=202) | Placebo (n=217) |
| Age (years) | 67 (58-76) | 68 (58-76) | 68 (59-76) | 68 (58-76) |
| Male Sex | 124 (56) | 124 (56) | 112 (55) | 119 (55) |
| Weight (kg) | 76 (65-90) | 80 (66-94) | 75 (65-87) | 78 (66-92) |
| Body-mass index | 26 (23-30) | 28 (23-32) | 26 (23-30) | 28 (23-32) |
| Race, no. white | 206 (93) | 206 (93) | 189 (94) | 203 (94) |
| Recent surgery | 78 (35) | 82 (37) | 73 (36) | 78 (36) |
| Pre-existing conditions | | | | |
| Ischaemic heart disease | 39 (18) | 26 (12) | 38 (19) | 24 (11) |
| Congestive heart failure | 1 (0.5) | 2 (1) | 1 (0.5) | 3 (1) |
| Cardiac failure | 20 (9) | 21 (10) | 19 (9) | 21 (10) |
| Severe COPD | 11 (5) | 10 (5) | 11 (5) | 10 (5) |
| Chronic renal failure | 15 (7) | 16 (7) | 14 (7) | 16 (7) |
| Cirrhosis | 4 (2) | 5 (2) | 3 (1) | 4 (2) |
| Immunocompromise | 20 (9) | 22 (10) | 20 (10) | 21 (10) |
| Diabetes | 57 (26) | 44 (20) | 52 (26) | 45 (21) |
| Beta-blockers normally taken | 46 (21) | 38 (17) | 44 (22) | 34 (16) |
| Time from shock to randomisation (hours) | 16 (11-21) | 15 (10-20) | 16 (11-21) | 15 (10-20) |
| Vasoactive-drug dose at randomisation | | | | |
| Noradrenaline | | | | |
| Number | 219 (99) | 217 (98) | 200 (99) | 213 (98) |
| Dose (µg/kg/min) | 0.27 (0.15-0.48) | 0.26 (0.14-0.43) | 0.27 (0.15-0.49) | 0.26 (0.14-0.43) |

| | | | | |
|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Adrenaline | | | | |
| Number | 14 (6) | 15 (7) | 13 (6) | 13 (6) |
| Dose (µg/kg/min) | 0.11 (0.05-0.21) | 0.16 (0.08-0.42) | 0.11 (0.06-0.23) | 0.16 (0.08-0.45) |
| Vasopressin | | | | |
| Number | 23 (10) | 30 (14) | 21 (10) | 29 (13) |
| Dose (units/min) | 0.03 (0.02-0.04) | 0.03 (0.02-0.04) | 0.03 (0.02-0.04) | 0.03 (0.02-0.04) |
| Dobutamine | | | | |
| Number | 16 (7) | 21 (10) | 15 (7) | 21 (10) |
| Dose (µg/kg/min) | 6.1 (3.5-9.4) | 5.1 (4.4-6.4) | 6.4 (3.0-9.5) | 5.1 (4.4-6.4) |

COPD – Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease

Table 2 Estimated effects of levosimendan on cardiovascular biomarkers. Change per day is expressed as a ratio, treatment differences are given as ratios of levosimendan compared with placebo and data in parentheses are 95% credible intervals.

| Variable | Biomarker | |
|---|---------------------|---------------------|
| | Cardiac troponin I | NT-proBNP |
| Change per day – levosimendan | 0.87 (0.74 to 1.01) | 1.09 (1.00 to 1.19) |
| Change per day – placebo | 0.75 (0.65 to 0.86) | 0.97 (0.90 to 1.05) |
| Probability of faster reduction in levosimendan | 0.082 | 0.032 |
| Treatment difference on day 2 | 1.12 (0.79 to 1.55) | 1.00 (0.84 to 1.19) |
| Treatment difference on day 4 | 1.30 (0.95 to 1.73) | 1.12 (0.96 to 1.30) |
| Treatment difference on day 6 | 1.52 (1.01 to 2.19) | 1.26 (1.02 to 1.54) |

Table 3 Estimated effects of levosimendan on inflammatory biomarkers. Change per day is expressed as a ratio, treatment differences are given as ratios of levosimendan compared with placebo and data in parentheses are 95% credible intervals.

| Variable | Biomarker | | | | |
|---|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| | CCL2 | IL-6 | IL-8 | IL-10 | sTNFr1 |
| Change per day – levosimendan | 0.78 (0.73, 0.83) | 0.50 (0.44, 0.56) | 0.85 (0.80, 0.91) | 0.68, (0.63, 0.73) | 0.90 (0.86, 0.93) |
| Change per day – placebo | 0.71 (0.66, 0.75) | 0.50 (0.45, 0.56) | 0.80 (0.75, 0.84) | 0.69 (0.65, 0.74) | 0.90 (0.86, 0.93) |
| Probability of faster reduction in levosimendan | 0.019 | 0.536 | 0.046 | 0.662 | 0.500 |
| Treatment difference on day 2 | 0.89 (0.78, 1.02) | 1.00 (0.79, 1.25) | 1.00 (0.85, 1.17) | 1.06 (0.90, 1.25) | 1.02 (0.93, 1.12) |
| Treatment difference on day 4 | 0.98 (0.87, 1.10) | 0.99 (0.81, 1.20) | 1.08 (0.93, 1.24) | 1.04 (0.90, 1.19) | 1.02 (0.94, 1.11) |
| Treatment difference on day 6 | 1.08 (0.92, 1.26) | 0.99 (0.74, 1.29) | 1.16 (0.97, 1.38) | 1.02 (0.85, 1.23) | 1.02 (0.92, 1.13) |

Figure 1 Recruitment, randomisation and cardiac biomarker measurement of patients recruited to the LeoPARDS study. ^a for a full description of the reasons for exclusion see [9]

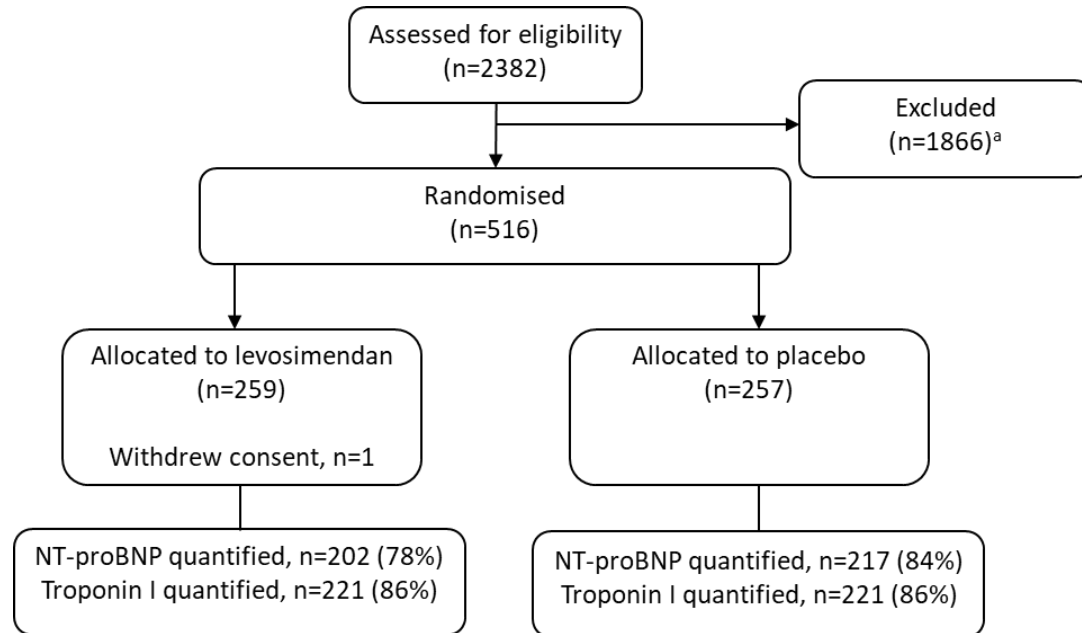


Figure 2a Forest plot showing the difference in mean total SOFA score, by subgroup based on cardiovascular biomarkers at baseline. **2b** Forest plot showing the difference in 28-day mortality, by subgroup based on cardiovascular biomarkers at baseline

