

**Title page:**

A statement from the British Society of Thoracic Imaging Statement: Considerations in designing local imaging diagnostic algorithms.

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## **Declarations / Conflicts of interest**

Joseph Jacob reports fees from Boehringer Ingelheim and Roche unrelated to the current submission and is supported by a Clinical Research Career Development Fellowship 209553/Z/17/Z from the Wellcome Trust.

Arjun Nair reports part funding from the UCL NIHR Biomedical Research Centre, and a medical advisory role with Aidence BV, an artificial intelligence company.

## Introduction

In accordance with guidance from the Chief Medical Officer's office and the Royal College of Radiologists, the British Society of Thoracic Imaging (BSTI) recognises that based on the available evidence imaging currently has no role in the diagnosis of 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) infection (*written communication, 7<sup>th</sup> March 2020*). Nevertheless, a number of reports have been published highlighting CT appearances in COVID-19, raising the possibility of a role for CT in patient management<sup>1-5</sup>. In response to these reports, the BSTI published a preliminary Consensus statement on 6<sup>th</sup> March 2020<sup>6</sup>.

We discuss below what role, if any, CT would play in the detection and management of COVID-19 infection in the UK, and the logistics of imaging delivery. This role is heavily predicated on the clinical context as well as the timing of its intended use within the diagnostic pathway, especially relative to the current reference standard diagnostic test, real-time reverse transcriptase fluorescence polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) of a pharyngeal swab<sup>7</sup>, and other clinical and laboratory investigations. Although it may not be feasible or desirable for isolation purposes to perform a chest radiograph (CXR), we should acknowledge that pragmatically patients with a respiratory complaint are likely to present via any number of routes (primary care, Emergency Departments or Outpatient clinics) having already had a CXR, other than to isolation pods outside a hospital, and work-up of a respiratory complaint would usually include a CXR in such settings. Cognizant of this fact, in the following discussion we have considered how a CXR would also fit into diagnostic algorithms, and in particular how the use of CT would alter management in settings where a CXR was or was not available.

As such, we deliberate the following questions:

1. Would a CT thorax contribute to management of symptomatic cases after a rapidly available RT-PCR result?
2. Would a CT thorax contribute to symptomatic cases if an RT-PCR test was not available or had to be rationed, and:
  - a. A chest radiograph had been performed and was abnormal?
  - b. A chest radiograph had been performed and was normal, or was not/could not be performed?
3. Would a CT thorax contribute to the detection and management of COVID-19 in asymptomatic high-risk cases?
4. How should imaging (CT thorax or CXR) be provided?

In the following discussion, a high pre-test probability is assumed for symptomatic cases, based on one or more of:

- Clinical presentation (NB: pyrexia of  $>37.3^{\circ}$  suspicious but not essential)
- Appropriate contact and/or travel history (recognising that this may not always be present)
- Compatible laboratory abnormalities [relative lymphopenia, elevated C-reactive protein (CRP)]<sup>8</sup>.

***Question 1: Would a CT thorax contribute to patient management after a rapidly available RT-PCR result?***

- *If the RT-PCR result is positive:*

CT findings in this setting would not change diagnosis and may be falsely negative in about 2-3% of RT-PCR positive cases<sup>2, 5</sup>. As such, we do not envisage a role for CT in this setting.

- *If the RT-PCR result is negative:*

In this setting, the role of CT is less certain. RT-PCR has a reported sensitivity of 60-70%<sup>2, 5</sup>) and thus approximately 30-40% of patients with COVID-19 infection could initially have a false negative result. False negative results may arise for a number of reasons including inadequate sampling technique or low viral load and thus many patients will require multiple testing to exclude the diagnosis. Ai et al found that of 64 patients with serial RT-PCR testing, 15/64 (23.4%) had subsequent positive RT-PCR (mean time interval  $5.1 \pm .5$  days). 10 of these patients (ie only 15.6% of those with initial negative RT-PCR) had typical features on CT at the time of initial negative RT-PCR<sup>5</sup>. Fang et al described a 29.4% rate of CT abnormality in patients with initially negative and subsequently positive RT-PCR<sup>2</sup>. As such, in the minority of patients with high clinical suspicion but negative initial RT-PCR, the presence of typical CT appearances such as peripheral ground-glass opacity could be used to rapidly diagnose COVID-19 infection, until such time as multiple negative testing is sufficient to exclude or change the diagnosis.

Conversely, it is important to note that a normal CT cannot be used to exclude a diagnosis of COVID-19 when duration of symptoms is short<sup>9</sup>, although there is some evidence to suggest that the negative predictive value of CT is higher when symptom duration is >1 week<sup>10, 11</sup>. Nevertheless, even in this scenario, multiple PCR testing should be the preferred method to exclude the diagnosis until further data is available or in the scenario of limited PCR testing availability (see Question 2).

Some CT characteristics such as pleural effusion, lymphadenopathy and tree-in-bud nodularity have been reported as uncommon in COVID-19 and the presence of these features should prompt for evaluation of alternative diagnoses.

Therefore we regard the role of CT in COVID-19 confirmed cases following RT-PCR results to be the same as in any other viral infection, in that it could be used to: (1) find co-existing or underlying diagnoses; (2) help diagnose complications, or investigate a clinically discordant picture (e.g. CRP decline, but increasing hypoxia); and (3) add value in patients with pre-existing lung diseases.

Even if CT is used to aid rapid diagnosis, it is unclear how this would translate into a change in management. A practical strategy for patients with initially negative RT-PCR could involve triage into the following categories:

- self-isolation at home for those with no CT abnormality, with serial testing later to definitively exclude the diagnosis;
- self-isolation or hospital isolation (depending on clinical status) for patients with typical CT appearances; and
- urgent evaluation for alternative diagnoses, while still maintaining isolation, for patients with non-typical CT abnormalities.

It certainly could be argued, however, that a combination of clinical, laboratory and CXR findings could also be used to triage patients in this way, in lieu of CT. The relative proportions of patients in each triage category would probably differ, given the increased sensitivity of CT for COVID-19, but we are unaware of any data comparing the sensitivity of CT to a combination of CXR and laboratory findings to shed any further light on the relative merits of these different strategies. A study by Xiong et al offers a compelling argument for

such a strategy: in their analysis of 42 patients, clinical findings and white blood cell count were not well-correlated with initial CT findings, but CRP, erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR) and serum lactate dehydrogenase (LDH) were significantly moderately to strongly correlated with the extent and severity of overall involvement and the size of the largest CT lesion<sup>10</sup>.

The notion of CT as central to diagnosis, over and above RT-PCR, continues to be challenged<sup>12</sup>. It is noteworthy that the fifth edition of the Diagnosis and Treatment Program of 2019 New Coronavirus Pneumonia proposed by The National Health Commission of China included chest CT findings as a diagnostic criterion<sup>13</sup>, but CT was removed in the more recent sixth and seventh versions<sup>14, 15</sup>, reflecting the extremely dynamic nature of consensus opinion on this subject.

***Question 2: Would a CT thorax contribute to symptomatic cases if an RT-PCR test was not available or had to be rationed?***

A limited or exhausted supply of RT-PCR testing kits is not inconceivable. Even if a robust supply was in place, other factors, such as interruption of transport infrastructure and availability of sufficient virology capacity, or the limited number of centres that could process results, could impede the utility of this test. We consider two scenarios:

*a. If a chest radiograph had been performed and was abnormal*

It is salutary that CXR may be abnormal in the majority of COVID-19 cases, especially severe cases<sup>16, 17</sup>, with severity defined according to standard definitions<sup>18</sup>. Huang et al found bilateral radiographic abnormalities in 40/41 (98%) of cases<sup>16</sup>; Guan et al found radiographic

abnormalities in 162/274 patients (59.1%), but CXR was more likely to be abnormal in severe disease [46/60 (76.7%) with severe disease, versus 116/214 (54.2%) of non-severe disease]<sup>17</sup>. Conversely, CT thorax has a very low specificity, approximately 25%, for COVID-19<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, CRP is abnormally elevated in between 61% to 92% of patients<sup>17, 19</sup>. As such, we do not consider a CT thorax to provide additive benefit to diagnosis and management over and above high clinical suspicion, laboratory findings and radiographic abnormalities in this setting. Further work is needed to understand the potential role of CT in providing prognostic information, in particular in patients with severe disease, including guiding management of patients recovering from severe disease.

*b. If a chest radiograph had been performed and was normal, or was not/could not be performed*

In this setting, the lack of initial RT-PCR testing availability could necessitate an alternative test. A CT thorax could then be viewed as the optimum initial diagnostic tool for all the reasons discussed in Question 1. Assuming it becomes necessary to elevate CT thorax to this position in the diagnostic work-up, the role of CT thorax in guiding management would be to triage patients into the categories discussed earlier (self-isolation at home with repeat testing as necessary, admission and isolation, or evaluation for alternative diagnoses).

In Table 1, we illustrate the possible use of CT as a triage mechanism prior to initial RT-PCR results being available. For all scenarios we have further assumed that, regardless of the presence or absence of initial radiographic abnormalities, initial management would necessitate isolation and standard care given high clinical suspicion. Furthermore, if a chest radiograph suggests an alternative diagnosis (such as lobar pneumonia), the CT may provide



no additional pragmatic benefit over and above clinical suspicion and RT-PCR results, and as such we do not consider it beneficial to explore the permutations of that scenario.

Table 1. Possible impact of CT on diagnosis of COVID-19, assuming no RT-PCR result initially available.

Scenario Number	CT findings for COVID-19	CT-based triage category <sup>a</sup>	Initial RT-PCR result	Would a rapidly available RT-PCR have voided the CT result?	Management post-initial RT-PCR result	Repeat RT-PCR result (4-10 days)	Management following repeat RT-PCR result
1	Typical	Isolation ± admission	Positive	Yes <sup>b</sup>	Unchanged	Positive	Unchanged
2	Typical	Isolation ± admission	Positive	Yes <sup>b</sup>	Unchanged	Negative	Unchanged. In this subgroup, 60% of cases show imaging features prior or parallel to RT-PCR positivity, and the subsequent negative RT-PCR does not decrease clinical probability of COVID-19 infection. However, the role of CT in evaluating response in conjunction with RT-PCR requires further work.
3	Typical	Isolation ± admission	Negative	No <sup>c</sup>	Unchanged	Positive	Unchanged. 16-29% of patients with initial negative RT-PCR could have positive typical CT findings.
4	Typical	Isolation ± admission	Negative	No	Downgrade to self-isolation, await repeat RT-PCR	Negative	Possible downgrade- may be considered COVID-19 negative. Repeat CT in this scenario may also have a role in guiding management along with clinical evaluation.
5	Clear	Self-isolation, do not admit	Positive	Yes <sup>b</sup>	Possible upgrade to admission depending on clinical status. Negative CT may indicate non-severe disease. Whether this independently	Positive	Unchanged

					impacts prognosis requires further work.		
6	Clear	Self-isolation, do not admit	Positive	Yes <sup>b</sup>	Possible upgrade to admission depending on clinical status. Whether this independently impacts prognosis requires further work.	Negative	Unchanged. RT-PCR results would be guiding management here, and a negative follow-up RT-PCR result does not exclude COVID-19 infection. However, the role of CT in evaluating response in conjunction with RT-PCR requires further work.
7	Clear	Self-isolation, do not admit	Negative	No <sup>c</sup>	Unchanged	Positive	Possible upgrade. Depending on symptom duration, initial CT could be negative.
8	Clear	Self-isolation, do not admit	Negative	Yes <sup>b</sup>	Unchanged	Negative	Possible downgrade- may be considered COVID-19 negative. In some clinical scenarios, CT may have a role in determining the frequency and prioritization of repeat testing – requires further consensus .

Notes:

<sup>a</sup>The decision to admit will be based on clinical and laboratory parameters.

<sup>b</sup>CT demonstration of underlying lung disease or alternative diagnosis could still be useful.

<sup>c</sup>RT-PCR would be false-negative in this scenario.

***Question 3: Would a CT thorax contribute to the detection and management of COVID-19 in asymptomatic high-risk cases?***

Data on the prevalence of CT abnormalities, and thus the accuracy of CT, in detecting COVID-19 in asymptomatic contacts of positive or confirmed cases is scarce. At the time of writing, we are aware of only one publication on the subject. Hu et al<sup>20</sup> evaluated the laboratory and CT characteristics of 24 asymptomatic close contacts who were COVID-19 carriers, as confirmed by RT-PCR. 17/24 (70.8%) had CT abnormalities, with 12 (50% of total) showing typical peripheral ground-glass opacity. The minority had lymphopenia (16.8%) and elevated CRP (17.4%). The 17 patients with CT abnormalities were older (median age 38 versus 14 years old,  $p=0.012$ ). Although at first glance this preliminary data would suggest that CT could be used to screen close contacts, we cannot envisage the practical value of such a strategy, compared to serial RT-PCR testing (as long as the latter is available), given that such contacts would be advised to self-isolate. Also, the specificity of CT or RT-PCR for screening asymptomatic contacts in this manner is undefined. As such, we do not see a role for CT in screening asymptomatic contacts at the present time.

***Question 4: How should imaging (CT thorax or chest radiography) be provided?***

Inevitably, the provision of imaging will depend on local protocols for isolation and identification of suspected COVID-19 patients when they first present. However, we consider the following broad options. Regardless of the option, the need to perform a comprehensive clean of equipment between patients (to protect negative patients from positive ones), and the implications that has for throughput, should be recognised.

1. *Mobile CXR unit alongside isolation "pod" located outside the main hospital building*

A mobile unit set up in this way would be able to maintain high throughput and fast image transfer and interpretation. Such a strategy may, with the agreement of local respiratory and infectious diseases teams, even obviate the need for CT thorax, but only if (a) RT-PCR testing and results are available rapidly; and (2) there is still an intention to isolate and treat patients with negative CXR and RT-PCR but high pre-test probability.

2. *Mobile CT scanner unit alongside isolation “pod” located outside the main hospital building*

A CT unit set up in this way would also allow high throughput, as the type of CT required for diagnosis is easy and rapid to perform (unenhanced thoracic CT). Image transfer and interpretation would take longer relative to CXR, but rapid reporting turnaround could be aided by structured reporting templates for relevant abnormalities only. An example template is provided in Appendix 1 below. Such a CT set up realistically obviates the need for mobile CXR provision.

3. *Mobile CT scanner in a community location*

It may be desirable to locate CT scanners in community locations away from the hospital or take advantage of existing community-located scanners. Adequate operating procedures to ensure rapid transmission of images to designated reporting centres would be required in such cases.

4. *Emergency Department (ED) CT/CXR for COVID-19 patients, mobile CT/CXR for routine ED imaging*

As patients with COVID-19 may bypass the isolation pods and present to ED itself, this strategy would allow for imaging to be performed without potentiating transmission to other ED attendees via the scanner. Regular ED work could be transferred to mobile scanners alongside the ED.

However, such a strategy would not obviate the need for local cleaning procedures. Also, logistically such a set up would be challenging due to default image transfer protocols and worklist interactions between ED scanners, Radiology Information Systems (RIS) and Picture Archiving and Communications Systems (PACS).

#### 5. *Fixed site non-ED CT scanner*

For trusts where CT scanner(s) are solely based within the radiology department contingency plans for 'scanner downtime' during deep cleans and policies to minimise cross-contamination would need to be instigated. An alternative would be for trusts to consider option 2. However, for inpatients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 infection who require further imaging, such as CT pulmonary angiography, or for very unwell patients, a fixed site ED or non-ED CT scanner would be the only options.

#### **Conclusion**

The putative role of CT in the diagnosis, triage and prognostication of patients with COVID-19 infection continues to be refined. We explore scenarios integrating CT into the diagnostic algorithm. However, the clinical value of this integration, compared to alternative strategies incorporating quick and immediately scalable standard clinical and laboratory assessment (even in the absence of RT-PCR availability) is unknown, because published studies on thoracic CT in COVID-19 infection to date have, frustratingly, described these assessments without analysing their relative merit as part of an alternative diagnostic strategy. In the absence of such data, we can only reiterate the need for strategic thinking that explores all available options to achieve maximum public benefit, optimise throughput in the shortest timeframe, and minimise detriment.

## **APPENDIX 1: Example of a rapid structured reporting template**

<All demographic and examination details>

### **Clinical details:**

**Normal study?** Yes/No

**If abnormal, predominant pattern:** Ground-glass opacity/ infection-type consolidation/ organising pneumonia /crazy-paving /centrilobular nodules/ tree-in-bud/ / cavitating nodules or mass/other (please specify)

**Lobar Distribution of predominant pattern:** upper lobe/ middle lobe/ lower lobe/ random

**Axial Distribution of predominant pattern:** Bronchocentric/ peripheral/ both or random

**Underlying lung disease:** No/ Yes (specify)

**Other findings:** <free text to comment as per usual thoracic CT report>

### **Conclusion:**

Highly suspicious for viral pneumonia/ possible viral pneumonia/ other diagnosis likely (please specify)

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