

1 **Title:** Long-term vision outcomes for patients with albinism and diabetic retinopathy

2 **Running title:** Albinism and diabetic retinopathy

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23 **Author contributions**

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24

25 **Data availability**

26 Data may be made available upon request from the corresponding author.

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29 **Conflicts of interest**

30 The authors declare no competing financial interests.

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35 **Ethical approval**

36 Not required because this is a retrospective study using data collected as part of the  
37 patient's routine clinical care.

38 **Consent to participate**

39 Not required because this is a retrospective study using data collected as part of the  
40 patient's routine clinical care.

41 **Consent for publication**

42 Not required because this is a retrospective study using data collected as part of the  
43 patient's routine clinical care.

44 **Declarations**

45 No authors have any declarations to make.

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49 **Key messages**

- 50 1. Albinism defines a group of genetic diseases characterised by depigmentation  
51 of the hair, skin and eyes in oculocutaneous albinism or isolated to the eyes in  
52 ocular albinism
- 53 2. Treating proliferative diabetic retinopathy in patients with  
54 ocular/oculocutaneous albinism may be more difficult due to potential  
55 challenges in identifying retinal vascular diseases and impaired efficacy of  
56 laser treatments
- 57 3. Despite extensive intervention, proliferative diabetic retinopathy is associated  
58 with poor long-term vision for patients with albinism.
- 59 4. Individuals without evidence of proliferative diabetic retinopathy appear to  
60 maintain stable vision so disease prevention is paramount

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71 **Abstract** (248 words)

72 Purpose

73 Albinism defines a group of genetic diseases which result from disordered melanin  
74 biosynthesis. Proliferative diabetic retinopathy (PDR) results from poorly controlled  
75 type 1 or 2 diabetes mellitus (DM) and can lead to blindness due to progressive  
76 neovascularisation. However, the treatment of PDR in patients with  
77 ocular/oculocutaneous albinism may be more challenging. In this study we compared  
78 a group of patients with albinism and PDR, to a group with albinism and diabetes  
79 mellitus but no PDR, to examine the long-term implications.

80 Methods

81 Retrospective observational study including all patients with ocular albinism (OA) or  
82 oculocutaneous albinism (OCA) and DM who presented at a single specialist centre.  
83 Participants were allocated into either group 1 (eyes with PDR) or group 2 (all eyes  
84 without PDR). Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS V26.0. Between-group  
85 differences were investigated.

86 Results

87 Outcome data was available for 5 eyes from 3 participants in group 1 and 26 eyes  
88 from 13 participants in group 2. Despite interventions, a large and significant  
89 difference in vision at follow-up was observed between group 1 and group 2 (mean  
90 change in visual acuity: 1.11 ( $\pm$ 1.00) versus -0.15 ( $\pm$ 0.46) respectively;  $p < 0.0001$ ).

91 Conclusion

92 PDR is associated with poor long-term prognosis despite interventions for patients  
93 with albinism. Those without PDR appear to maintain stable vision. Alternative

94 treatments for PDR and its complications may be required in this population.  
95 Measures to prevent the development of diabetic eye disease and progression  
96 towards PDR should be employed at an early stage.

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98 **Key words:** Albinism; diabetes; diabetic retinopathy; ocular albinism

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114 **Introduction** (1650 words)

115 Albinism defines a group of genetic diseases which result from disordered melanin  
116 biosynthesis and is characterised by depigmentation of the hair, skin and eyes in  
117 oculocutaneous albinism (OCA) or isolated to the eyes in ocular albinism (OA).[1] It  
118 can have a range of ocular manifestations including nystagmus, iris and choroidal  
119 hypopigmentation, foveal hypoplasia and impaired stereopsis. [2–4]

120

121 Proliferative diabetic retinopathy (PDR) is the commonest cause of severe vision  
122 loss in patients with diabetes mellitus (DM). It is characterised by progressive  
123 neovascularisation (NV) and associated complications such as neovascular  
124 glaucoma, vitreous haemorrhages and retinal detachment. The current gold standard  
125 treatment for patients with PDR remains panretinal photocoagulation (PRP);  
126 although more recently, studies using anti-vascular endothelial growth factor (anti-  
127 VEGF) agents to manage PDR have also been published.[5] 15.9% of untreated  
128 PDR is associated with blindness after two-years, compared with 6.4% in PRP-  
129 treated eyes.[6]

130

131 The identification and treatment of PDR may be more challenging in patients with  
132 albinism. The lack of retinal pigment limits the visualisation of the retina because  
133 imaging modalities such as fundus autofluorescence (FAF) and fundus fluorescein  
134 angiography (FFA) rely on retinal pigments to help differentiate anatomical  
135 structures. Moreover, the efficacy of PRP at managing neovascular retinal disease  
136 may be limited in albinism. Retinal pigments absorb retinal laser energy which is  
137 converted to thermal energy. This causes coagulative necrosis and impairs the

138 production of pro-angiogenic cytokines from. The deficiency of retinal pigment in  
139 albinism results in minimal or no laser energy absorption, so NV may persist.[7]

140

141 In this study we aimed to compare a group of patients with albinism and PDR and a  
142 group with albinism and DM but no PDR, to determine the implications on long-term  
143 vision.

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## 145 **Materials and Methods**

### 146 Dataset

147 This retrospective observational study included all patients with OCA or OA and a  
148 diagnosis of DM who presented to Moorfields Eye Hospital, London, United Kingdom  
149 (UK) between the 1<sup>st</sup> November 2000 and 1<sup>st</sup> November 2019.

150 This study adhered to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki. All data and imaging  
151 were collected as part of routine care and fully anonymised, and therefore under UK  
152 guidelines this study was categorized as a service evaluation and did not require  
153 ethical approval.

154 This article conforms to the STROBE checklist.[8]

### 155 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

156 All patients with albinism and a diagnosis of DM (type 1 or type 2) were eligible for  
157 inclusion. All eyes which showed evidence of other retinal pathologies were excluded  
158 to limit potential confounding of results (n=3). Patients with less than 6 months follow  
159 up were excluded from statistical analyses relating to visual acuity outcomes (n=1).

### 160 Variables



161 Baseline characteristics, diabetic retinopathy grade (according to Diabetic screening  
162 programme in England and Wales[9]), interventions and best correct visual acuity  
163 (BCVA) at baseline and their most recent follow-up appointment were recorded in an  
164 electronic database.

### 165 Groups

166 Patients were divided into one of two categories. Group 1 included all eyes which  
167 showed evidence of PDR. Group 2 included all eyes which showed no evidence of  
168 PDR.

### 169 Statistical analysis

170 The patient was considered the unit of analysis when reporting baseline  
171 characteristics. The individual eye was considered the unit of analysis when  
172 reporting interventions and BCVA because the study aimed to examine vision per  
173 each eye.

174 SPSS V26.0 was used to perform all statistical analyses. Shapiro-wilk test was used  
175 to determine normality for continuous data. Normally distributed continuous variables  
176 are presented as means ( $\pm$  standard deviation (SD)). Categorical data is described  
177 as frequencies. All visual acuities were defined using Snellen acuities which were  
178 then converted to logarithm of the minimum angle of resolution (logMAR) units for  
179 statistical analysis; we defined counting fingers as logMAR 2.0, hand movements  
180 (HM) as 2.4, perception of light (PL) as 2.7 and no perception of light as 3.0.[10]  
181 Between-group differences were compared with independent samples T-tests for  
182 continuous variables.  $p \leq 0.05$  defined statistical significance.

### 183 Results

184 Study cohort

185 There were no significant between group differences at baseline. **(Table 2)**

186 Interventions for PDR

187 Interventions received by each patient are outlined in **table 3**. One patient received  
188 PRP and cryotherapy and bilateral pars plana vitrectomy (PPV) with membrane  
189 delamination and silicone oil tamponade to both eyes. One eye from one patient  
190 received intravitreal anti-VEGF (bevacizumab) on five occasions, PRP on two  
191 occasions to the right eye and PPV and membrane delamination with silicone oil  
192 tamponade. Finally, one patient received PRP and bevacizumab once to the left eye  
193 and underwent intravitreal bevacizumab on three occasions to the right eye.

194 Change in vision

195 The change in BCVA from baseline to the most recent follow-up appointment was  
196 compared between groups. Despite interventions, a large and significant difference  
197 was observed between group 1 and group 2 (mean change in VA: 1.11 ( $\pm$ 1.00)  
198 versus -0.15 ( $\pm$ 0.46) respectively;  $p < 0.0001$ ). **(Figure 1)**

199 Patient cases with PDR

200 In our study, three patients showed evidence of PDR.

201 Case 1 (patient number 1, table 1, **figure 2**) is a thirty-one-year-old male with poorly  
202 controlled type I diabetes mellitus and Oculocutaneous albinism type 1A (OCA1A),  
203 referred for treatment of longstanding bilateral PDR. High-power laser, PRP,  
204 fluorescein-assisted diode laser photocoagulation, diode laser PRP and non-  
205 confluent cryoablation combined with intravitreal anti-VEGF were all applied to both  
206 eyes but failed to halt active proliferative disease so surgery was performed to the

207 right eye (PPV, delamination, PRP, cryotherapy and silicone oil tamponade).  
208 Unfortunately, one-week later the patient developed a right-sided retinal detachment  
209 requiring PPV, retinotomy and silicone oil tamponade. Two-weeks later the left-eye  
210 developed a combined tractional and rhegmatogenous retinal detachment with  
211 proliferative vitreoretinopathy requiring PPV, delamination, cryotherapy and silicone  
212 oil tamponade. BCVA did not improve beyond PL in the right-eye, and HM in the left-  
213 eye. Dense cataracts developed bilaterally; both underwent anti-VEGF one-week  
214 before phacoemulsification, capsulectomy and inferior peripheral iridectomies.  
215 Subjective vision improved in both eyes but without objective improvement.

216 Case 2 (patient number 2, table 1, **figure 3**) is a fifty-three-year-old male with poorly  
217 controlled type 2 diabetes mellitus, OCA1A, right-sided PDR, and a left-sided  
218 decompensated cornea and rubeotic glaucoma (Left-eye BCVA: NPL at first  
219 presentation). He presented via eye emergency with a macula-involving tractional  
220 retinal detachment, inferior diabetic vitreous haemorrhage, macular oedema and  
221 rubeosis iridis; immediate treatment with PRP was performed but AF and FFA  
222 showed no scarring post-PRP so intravitreal anti-VEGF was injected on numerous  
223 occasions but despite treatment, vision deteriorated to HM after two-months. The  
224 tractional retinal detachment progressed after two-months so managed with 23G  
225 PPV, retinal delamination, cryopexy and high-viscosity silicone oil injection; despite  
226 reattachment and regressed neovascularisation, BCVA did not improve. Three-years  
227 later rubeotic glaucoma developed in the right eye requiring a Baerveldt aqueous  
228 shunt, mitomycin C and a right scleral graft to control IOP, followed by anterior  
229 chamber paracentesis and intravitreal anti-VEGF. BCVA showed no improvement.

230 Case 3 (patient number 3, table 1, **figure 4**) is a twenty-eight-year-old male with  
231 OCA1A, type I diabetes and bilateral PDR, who presented with acute complete

232 vision loss and photopsia in the left-eye owing to a left ischaemic central retinal vein  
233 occlusion which was managed conservatively. Four-weeks later rubeotic glaucoma  
234 was identified in the right-eye which was treated using topical eye drops for three-  
235 weeks before cyclodiode laser ablation and intra-vitreous anti-VEGF were  
236 administered and IOP normalised over one-year. One-year later he presented with a  
237 left subtotal combined tractional and RRD requiring PPV, delamination, retinectomy,  
238 lensectomy and high-viscosity silicone oil tamponade. The retinectomy edge was left  
239 untreated because of laser non-uptake previously and the posterior location  
240 prohibited cryopexy. There was no improvement in vision.

## 241 **Discussion**

242 Our study suggests that for patients with albinism and DM, evidence of PDR heralds  
243 the development of severe vision loss despite interventions. Patients without PDR  
244 appear to maintain their vision for many years without significant deterioration.  
245 Treatments employed to manage PDR and its complications may be less effective in  
246 patients with albinism due to the lack of retinal pigmentation. Therefore, measures  
247 which prevent the development of PDR should be implemented at an early stage in  
248 this patient group to prevent vision loss, with patients being educated about the likely  
249 poor prognosis should they develop advanced diabetic eye disease.

250 In patients without albinism, prompt PRP has been advised for the prevention and  
251 treatment of proliferative vascular diseases, particularly PDR[11], and for  
252 complications which arise secondary to NV.[11–16] The mechanism underpinning  
253 how PRP can treat PDR is most likely attributed to the absorption of laser energy by  
254 retinal pigment which is then converted to thermal energy. The temperature of the  
255 retina increases causing protein denaturation and coagulative necrosis, but spares

256 the choroid, neural retina or photoreceptors.[7] The reduced or absent retinal  
257 pigmentation in albinism likely impairs retinal absorption of laser and thereby curtails  
258 its ability to induce coagulative necrosis.[7, 17, 18] As a result, pro-angiogenic  
259 cytokines continue to be synthesized, so NV persists. Our study supports this theory  
260 because PRP failed to treat disease activity in our patients with albinism and PDR.  
261 Vision continued to deteriorate even when PRP was applied on multiple occasions  
262 by retina specialists.[12] **(Table 3)**

263 Treatment with intravitreal anti-VEGF therapies has been shown to provide better  
264 short-term and, either equivalent or superior long-term, clinical outcomes compared  
265 with PRP for managing PDR.[5, 19] In our study, intravitreal anti-VEGF was applied  
266 on 5 occasions to the right eye of patient 2 which resulted in less visual deterioration  
267 (0.9 logMAR units) than the other eyes with PDR. Although this approach to the  
268 treatment of PDR in patients without albinism is not currently believed to be cost  
269 effective unless diabetic macular oedema is present, in patients with albinism it is  
270 likely that an approach involving early and frequently treatment with intravitreal anti-  
271 VEGF may be more effective at preserving vision and should be considered the  
272 treatment of choice.

273 PDR can induce and accelerate other ophthalmological diseases such as retinal  
274 detachments, vitreous hemorrhages and neovascular glaucoma which often require  
275 surgery to restore or preserve vision.[20] In patients without albinism, surgery can  
276 successfully manage many of these NV-related complications, however, alternative  
277 approaches may be required in albinism. Firstly, peri-operative PRP is almost  
278 universally used in patients without albinism and is thought to be an essential adjunct  
279 to vitrectomy to reduce vascular proliferation. During delamination surgery creation  
280 of retinal breaks is a common peri-operative complication and without the option of

281 effective laser the risk of subsequent retinal detachment is high. There are some  
282 reports that long-duration laser or trans-scleral cryopexy could be a more effective  
283 alternative in albinism, however with posterior pathology and retinal traction this is  
284 not always feasible.[21–23] It is likely that several surgical interventions in  
285 combination with long-term silicone oil tamponade and/or encircling buckle will be  
286 required to treat retinal detachments associated with PDR in albinism.[12, 23][24]  
287 Current evidence supporting the adoption of alternative surgical approaches is  
288 limited and further investigations are required.

289 Current methods used to image the retina such as FAF and FFA are also limited in  
290 albinism. Difficulty arises because FAF and FFA use retinal pigment to help  
291 differentiate anatomical retinal structures in the retina. Laser burns, which are usually  
292 visible within hours after PRP is applied, cannot be observed so it is difficult to  
293 determine whether PRP was unsuccessful at inducing photocoagulation or whether  
294 the laser burns could not be visualised due to limitations in the imaging modality  
295 used.[25, 26] Imaging the retina in patients with albinism using phase resolved  
296 spectral domain optical coherence tomography (SDOCT) M-mode scanning may be  
297 a more valuable alternative because it measures retinal photocoagulation  
298 independent of pigmentation by analysing changes in the local optical path of laser  
299 lesions.[27]

### 300 **Limitations**

301 Our study has several limitations. Due to the rarity of patients with concurrent  
302 albinism and DM, the sample size is very small so the study is at risk of type II  
303 errors. Patients were identified from a single centre in the UK so the generalisability  
304 of conclusions may be limited. In the future, prospective multi-centred studies are

305 required to determine the influence of PDR on vision outcomes when adjusted for  
306 potential confounders due to the rarity of ocular albinism. A meta-analysis using  
307 individual patient data should be performed to further understand the effectiveness of  
308 therapies at managing PDR in albinism and to derive best-practice guidance for  
309 managing patients with albinism and PDR.

### 310 **Conclusions**

311 In patients with albinism, evidence of PDR carries a poor long-term visual prognosis  
312 despite interventions. Patients without PDR appear to maintain their vision for many  
313 years without significant deterioration. Alternative treatment approaches are likely to  
314 be required in this population. Measures which prevent the development of DM  
315 and/or progression towards PDR should be employed at an early stage.

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### 399 **Figure legends**

#### 400 **Figure 1:**

401 A comparison of the mean change in best correct visual acuity from baseline and the  
402 most recent follow-up appointment between group 1 and group 2. Statistical analysis  
403 was based on 5 eyes from 3 patients (group 1) and 26 eyes from 13 patients (group  
404 2). There is a significant difference observed between group 1 and group 2 (mean  
405 change in VA: 1.11 ( $\pm 1.00$ ) versus -0.15 ( $\pm 0.46$ ) respectively;  $p < 0.0001$ ).

#### 406 **Figure 2**

407 Patient number 1, a male with type I diabetes, oculocutaneous albinism and R3a  
408 proliferative diabetic retinopathy. Fundus image of the right eye shows proliferative  
409 retinopathy and a vitreous haemorrhage (A) and a high-magnification fundus image  
410 of the left eye (B) shows characteristic ocular albinism features such as clear  
411 choroidal vasculature, a pale retina, and indistinct optic disc margin. Fundal  
412 autofluorescence of the left eye shows a hyperfluorescent retina (C) and fundal  
413 fluorescein angiography suggests minimal uptake 6-months after panretinal  
414 photocoagulation (D). Spectral domain ocular coherence tomography (SDOCT) of  
415 the left eye shows gross macular oedema (E). A photograph of the left eye  
416 demonstrates rubeosis iridis and an inferior iridectomy (F).

#### 417 **Figure 3**

418 Patient number 2, a male with type 2 diabetes, oculocutaneous albinism and R3a  
419 proliferative diabetic retinopathy. Fundus image of the right eye (A) shows  
420 proliferative vitreoretinopathy and a vitreous haemorrhage. Fundus fluorescein  
421 angiography of the right eye (B) 12-months after panretinal photocoagulation (PRP)  
422 application suggests minimal laser uptake. Fundal autofluorescence of the right eye  
423 12-months following PRP (C). There is retinal hypofluorescence and minimal laser  
424 uptake.

425 Figure 4

426 Patient number 3, a male with type I diabetes mellitus, oculocutaneous albinism and  
427 bilateral R3a proliferative diabetic retinopathy. The discrepancy in the appearance of  
428 scars of photocoagulation between a fundus photo and FAF results from the  
429 differential absorption of the laser energy in patients with albinism due to the lack of  
430 pigment. High magnification (A) fundus images of the right (A) and left (B) eye which  
431 show new blood vessel formation at the optic disc, macula and peripheral retina. (C)  
432 Fundus image of the right eye 18-months after anti-vascular endothelial growth  
433 factor intravitreal injections showing evidence of blood vessel regression. (D) Right  
434 eye 9-months following panretinal photocoagulation application with active disease  
435 present, likely due to poor laser uptake. Autofluorescence images of the (E) Right  
436 and (F) left eye following panretinal photocoagulation, suggesting poor laser uptake.