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## Should medical treatment options be exhausted before splenectomy is performed in adult ITP patients? A debate

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**Abstract:** Patients with primary immune thrombocytopenia (ITP) may require treatment to reduce the risk of serious bleeding if platelets remain consistently below  $30 \times 10^9/L$ . While approximately 70-80% of patients respond to an initial course of corticosteroids, relapse is common. For steroid-refractory patients, there is a choice between surgical splenectomy and further medical treatments, based on many factors including the patient's bleeding history, fitness for surgery, comorbidities, tolerance of adverse events, lifestyle and preferences. Treatments that have traditionally been used (corticosteroids, azathioprine, danazol) suppress the immune system, potentially predisposing patients to infection. Recent insights into the underlying pathophysiology of the disease have allowed the development of targeted therapies, including the thrombopoietin (TPO) receptor agonists, which enhance platelet production. Phase III trials have found romiplostim and eltrombopag to be well tolerated and effective in elevating platelet counts and reducing bleeding in both splenectomised and nonsplenectomised patients with chronic ITP. The B-cell targeted monoclonal antibody rituximab has also shown some potential in this setting, although data are currently limited and there are toxicity concerns.

The decision whether to proceed to splenectomy or try other medical therapies in corticosteroid-refractory patients remains patient-specific. Splenectomy has its risks (including perioperative and long-term risks), and relapse/nonresponse are relatively common, but it offers the possibility of cure in the majority of patients. However, newer treatments may potentially allow splenectomy to be deferred for prolonged periods, as well as providing alternative treatment options for patients who fail splenectomy.

## REVIEW ARTICLE

[26 MAY 2010]

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## Should Medical Treatment Options be Exhausted before Splenectomy is Performed in Adult ITP Patients? A Debate

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## **Abstract**

**Patients with primary immune thrombocytopenia (ITP) may require treatment to reduce the risk of serious bleeding if platelets remain consistently below  $30 \times 10^9/L$ . While approximately 70-80% of patients respond to an initial course of corticosteroids, relapse is common. For steroid-refractory patients, there is a choice between surgical splenectomy and further medical treatments, based on many factors including the patient's bleeding history, fitness for surgery, comorbidities, tolerance of adverse events, lifestyle and preferences. Treatments that have traditionally been used (corticosteroids, azathioprine, danazol) suppress the immune system, potentially predisposing patients to infection. Recent insights into the underlying pathophysiology of the disease have allowed the development of targeted therapies, including the thrombopoietin (TPO) receptor agonists, which enhance platelet production. Phase III trials have found romiplostim and eltrombopag to be well tolerated and effective in elevating platelet counts and reducing bleeding in both splenectomised and nonsplenectomised patients with chronic ITP. The B-cell targeted monoclonal antibody rituximab has also shown some potential in this setting, although data are currently limited and there are toxicity concerns.**

**The decision whether to proceed to splenectomy or try other medical therapies in corticosteroid-refractory patients remains patient-specific. Splenectomy has its risks (including perioperative and long-term risks), and relapse/nonresponse are relatively common, but it offers the possibility of cure in the majority of patients. However, newer treatments may potentially allow splenectomy to be deferred for prolonged periods, as well as providing alternative treatment options for patients who fail splenectomy.**

**Keywords:** Immune Thrombocytopenia; Splenectomy; Thrombopoietin Agonists; Corticosteroids

## INTRODUCTION

Primary immune thrombocytopenia (ITP; previously referred to as idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura), is defined as isolated thrombocytopenia (platelet counts  $<100 \times 10^9/L$ ) of unknown cause. Clinical manifestations vary and may be absent or range from petechiae or purpura and easy bruising to potentially life-threatening bleeding episodes. Whereas ITP in children is often characterised by abrupt onset of petechiae and purpura, associated with viral infection or immunisation, and short-lived ( $<6$  months), ITP in adults typically has a more insidious onset and is more likely to follow a chronic course ( $\geq 12$  months).

The severity of thrombocytopenia is the most important risk factor for major bleeding and management of chronic ITP is aimed at preventing bleeding, rather than normalising the platelet count. Treatment is usually indicated in patients with platelet counts  $<30 \times 10^9/L$  and those with counts between 30 and  $50 \times 10^9/L$  with bleeding or at risk of bleeding (e.g. planned surgery, dental extraction, parturition, active peptic ulcer) [1, 2]. Corticosteroids are the standard first-line treatment, while intravenous immune globulin (IVIg) and anti-D (with or without methylprednisolone and platelet transfusions) are used mainly for 'rescue' treatment of serious bleeding episodes. Anti-D has also been an option for nonsplenectomised Rhesus-positive patients who are unable to receive corticosteroids, but is no longer available in the EU. Typically, a course of prednis(ol)one is given, at a dosage of 1 to 2 mg/kg/day, with dosage being tapered after a short time (usually within a few weeks), in order to avoid inducing corticosteroid-related adverse effects. Another regimen used in many countries is 1-4 courses of dexamethasone 40 mg/day for 4 consecutive days, at 14-day intervals [3].

Approximately 70-80% of patients respond to corticosteroids initially [3], but relapse is common with many patients requiring repeated or prolonged treatment. For second-line treatment, there is a choice between surgical splenectomy (in patients who are fit for surgery) and a wide range of medical treatments (**Figure 1**). While international guidelines for ITP have been published [1-3], there is no consensus regarding the best sequence of treatments and treatment is individualised, based on such factors as the patient's bleeding history, comorbidities, tolerance of adverse events, degree of worry about disease burden, lifestyle, accessibility to care, and preferences. For reviews on the subject, see Bussell [4], and Cines and McMillan [5].

1 As the choice of treatments has expanded in recent years with the introduction of  
2 several new agents, this article examines the question of whether medical treatment  
3 options should generally be exhausted before splenectomy is performed in adults with  
4 chronic severe ITP requiring treatment. Arguments for and against early splenectomy  
5 are presented.  
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## 10 **ARGUMENTS AGAINST EARLY SPLENECTOMY**

### 11 **1. The natural history of adult ITP varies and spontaneous remissions can occur**

12 Chronic ITP in adults has a variable and unpredictable course, with very wide inter-  
13 patient heterogeneity. Spontaneous remissions (without splenectomy) occur in  
14 approximately 10% of patients, with and without medical treatment. There is  
15 increasing evidence that remissions can occur up to 1 or 2 years after onset [6, 7],  
16 suggesting that surgery may be deferred for prolonged periods [3, 7, 8]. For instance  
17 Sailer et al. found that in 114 patients with platelet count  $< 20 \times 10^9/L$  at diagnosis  
18 who were treated with first-line therapies (corticosteroids and/or IVIg), complete or  
19 partial remission was most likely to occur within the first 6 months (28 [30%] and 15  
20 [13%] patients), but a further 17 complete and 8 partial responses occurred between 6  
21 months and 3 years [7]. Thus, approximately 60% of patients eventually achieved  
22 remission, supporting the argument for delaying definitive decisions in ITP.  
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### 38 **2. Splenectomy results are unpredictable and it is associated with significant** 39 **morbidity**

40 Splenectomy has been utilised for treatment of ‘idiopathic purpura’ since the early  
41 1900s [9], when there was no rigorous testing of procedures. This procedure is  
42 associated with a number of risks, including complications of general anaesthesia and  
43 bleeding (the major immediate risk for an ITP patient), as well as perioperative  
44 complications such as pneumonia, wound/other infection, ileus, and thrombosis.  
45 Complication rates vary considerably [10-13] and appear to be higher in those aged  
46  $\geq 60$  years [14]. Laparoscopic splenectomy is associated with lower complication and  
47 mortality rates than open splenectomy [10, 15] (9.6 vs 12.9% and 0.2% vs 1%) [10],  
48 but is nevertheless associated with the risk of infectious complications. Moreover,  
49 follow-up times are much shorter and complications associated with surgery in  
50 general are still apparent. Overwhelming post-splenectomy infection (OPSI) is the  
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major concern after splenectomy, although quantifying the risk is difficult because of the lack of consistent data. Other long-term complications include vascular events (**Table 1**), as recently reviewed by Crary and Buchanan [16].

Approximately one-third of patients fail to achieve complete response to splenectomy and a substantial proportion of initial responders subsequently relapse [10, 12] (Figure 2). Although most relapses occur within the first 2 years after splenectomy, relapses continue to occur after that time point [12, 17] and it has been suggested that most patients eventually relapse [18]. There is at present no widely accepted and reliable test to identify patients who will fail splenectomy. It is unclear whether indium-labelled autologous platelet scanning [19] or response to high-dose IVIg [20, 21] can accurately predict response. Moreover, platelet scanning is expensive and not yet widely available and results may be poor at very low platelet counts.

### **3. Splenectomy is an irreversible procedure that limits subsequent treatment options**

As there is no current work on preservation of spleen tissue and later reimplantation, splenectomy is at present an irreversible procedure [22]. Patients who do not respond to splenectomy may not respond to many of the currently available immunosuppressive treatments [23] and are ineligible for anti-D therapy [22], thus their subsequent treatment options are very limited. These patients have a poor prognosis: a 12-year follow-up of >100 patients who failed splenectomy found that almost 30% responded poorly to subsequent treatments. 30% of patients died: 16% from ITP-related causes (bleeding 10% or complications of treatment, including sepsis 6%) [**Figure 3**] [24]. A study by George et al. also indicated that patients who fail splenectomy have worse health-related quality of life (HRQoL) compared with non-splenectomised patients who have similar platelet counts [25]. This was shown by lower scores for 7 of 10 scales of the disease-specific ITP-PAQ (ITP Patient Assessment Questionnaire) instrument: Symptoms, Bother, Activity, Social Activity, Fear, Psychological Health and overall quality of life.

Moreover, splenectomised patients are immunocompromised and therefore at risk of fatal bacterial infection, requiring lifelong continuing vigilance. Patients are generally immunised with pneumococcal, *Haemophilus influenzae* and meningococcal

1 vaccinations at least 2 weeks before surgery, with revaccination according to local  
2 practices. Vaccinations may not be effective in patients who have received rituximab  
3 in the previous 6 months [3]. Vaccination against influenza is also recommended by  
4 some authorities [26]. Antibiotic prophylaxis is required after surgery, with British  
5 authorities suggesting that this should be continued for several years [1], or lifelong  
6 [26, 27]. However, this practice is not based on strong evidence and is not actually  
7 incorporated in guidelines from other countries [2]. Surveys have shown a need for  
8 better education of patients regarding the risk of post-splenectomy infection [28].  
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16 Finally, splenectomy is increasingly seen as ‘removal of a healthy organ’ and many  
17 well-informed patients refuse splenectomy on this basis. This is reflected in the falling  
18 rates of splenectomy over recent years, as new treatments become available [29].  
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#### 22 **4. New agents have changed the treatment paradigm.**

23 Increased understanding of the pathophysiology underlying ITP has allowed the  
24 development of many new treatments. While conventional therapies such as  
25 corticosteroids and splenectomy primarily focus on reducing platelet destruction [30,  
26 31], the finding that platelet production is suboptimal in a substantial proportion of  
27 patients with ITP [32, 33] has led to development of the TPO mimetics, which  
28 enhance platelet production and may therefore provide better outcomes [34].  
29 Additionally, increased knowledge regarding the peripheral role of B-cells in  
30 autoimmune disease has led to evaluation of agents that target these cells [35].  
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#### 42 *TPO mimetics*

43 The identification of thrombopoietin (TPO) in the mid-1990s as the primary growth  
44 factor that regulates platelet production paved the way for development of a new class  
45 of agents, the TPO receptor agonists [36]. The ‘peptibody’ romiplostim [37-39] was  
46 the first TPO mimetic to reach the clinic. Unlike the earlier recombinant TPOs [40,  
47 41], romiplostim does not cross-react with endogenous human TPO, since its active  
48 peptide domain does not share any sequence homology with native TPO [37, 42]. It  
49 is administered as a weekly subcutaneous injection, at a starting dose of 1 mcg/kg,  
50 which is individualised according to patient response.  
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1 Data from two parallel Phase III trials in patients with severe and refractory chronic  
2 ITP indicated that treatment with romiplostim results in a platelet count of  $\geq 50 \times$   
3  $10^9/L$  in approximately 80% of patients. Eighty-eight percent of non-splenectomised  
4 and 79% of splenectomised patients achieved the target range of  $50-200 \times 10^9/L$  for at  
5 least 4 weeks (**Figure 4**) [34]. Platelet increases are observed within 1-2 weeks of  
6 starting treatment, with approximately 50% of patients achieving platelet counts  $\geq 50 \times$   
7  $10^9/L$  within 2-3 weeks. Bleeding events are significantly reduced and the majority of  
8 patients are able to reduce or discontinue concurrent ITP therapy including steroids,  
9 azathioprine and danazol, as well as requiring less rescue medication (IVIg, and Anti-  
10 D) [**Figure 4**] [34]. An open-label extension study has demonstrated the long-term  
11 efficacy and tolerability of romiplostim in 142 patients treated for periods of up to 3  
12 years [43]. Platelet responses ( $\geq 50 \times 10^9/L$  and double the baseline value, in the  
13 absence of rescue medication within the preceding 8 weeks) were seen in 87% of  
14 patients. Many patients (~60%) were able to self-administer their romiplostim  
15 injections. A 5-year update was recently presented at the 2009 ASH Annual Meeting ,  
16 in which it was shown that patients were able to maintain platelet counts within the  
17 target range with minimal dose adjustments and that adverse events did not increase  
18 over time [44]. Romiplostim has also been reported to improve HRQoL in chronic  
19 ITP patients [25].

20 Adverse events were reported in almost all patients in the pivotal phase III  
21 romiplostim studies (romiplostim 100%, placebo 95%), but were generally mild to  
22 moderate and appeared to be related to the underlying disease [34]. Very few patients  
23 receiving long-term romiplostim treatment discontinue the drug because of adverse  
24 events [34, 43]. There was no evidence of increased risk of thromboembolic events  
25 [34, 45] and no evidence of antibodies that cross-reacted with endogenous TPO or  
26 affected the platelet response [34, 43], except in one instance, where a patient  
27 transiently developed romiplostim-neutralizing antibodies. In two patients  
28 neutralizing antibodies to romiplostim were detected which did not cross-react with  
29 endogenous TPO. There is a risk of rebound thrombocytopenia after stopping  
30 treatment and patients who discontinue romiplostim should be carefully monitored.  
31 Presence of/increased bone marrow reticulin has been found in a number of patients  
32 treated with various TPO mimetics [34, 43, 46]. The clinical significance of these  
33 findings is yet to be clarified, although reticulin deposition is often present in the bone  
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1 marrow of individuals with and without ITP and there has been no evidence of  
2 progression to collagen fibrosis, or clonal myeloproliferative disorder after  
3 romiplostim treatment (**Table 1**).  
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7 Other TPO mimetics recently developed include the synthetic small molecule agent  
8 eltrombopag [47, 48]. It is given as an oral once-daily dose, on an empty stomach  
9 (separated from divalent cation-containing foods and supplements by at least 4 hours)  
10 [49]. Phase III data (n=114 patients) have been published [50]. Eltrombopag (initial  
11 dose 50 mg/day) achieved platelet counts of  $\geq 50 \times 10^9/L$  on day 43 in 59% of patients,  
12 while decreasing bleeding symptoms. Adverse events were reported in 59% of  
13 eltrombopag and 37% of placebo recipients. Hepatobiliary laboratory abnormalities  
14 were more common with eltrombopag than with placebo and cataracts were reported  
15 with similar frequency in both treatment groups [50]. Longer-term data from a phase  
16 III extension study [51] and a 6-month phase III study [52] appear to support these  
17 findings but are yet to be fully published in the literature.  
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### 28 *Rituximab*

29 The anti-CD20 antibody rituximab, which selectively depletes B-cell lymphocytes, is  
30 licensed for the treatment of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (NHL), chronic lymphocytic  
31 leukaemia (CLL) and rheumatoid arthritis [53] and has been used extensively off-  
32 label for treating a range of autoimmune diseases, including ITP[54]. The optimal  
33 dose and timing of rituximab in chronic ITP are yet to be defined and dosage  
34 schedules in most studies have been based on those used in the lymphoma setting, i.e  
35 weekly doses of  $375 \text{mg}/\text{m}^2$  for 4 weeks.  
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45 An analysis of data from descriptive and comparative studies suggests that rituximab  
46 produces a 63% overall response rate (46% complete response rate;  $>150 \times 10^9/L$ ) in  
47 patients with chronic ITP, although the definition of response varied widely in the  
48 reported trials [54]. The median time to response was 5.5 weeks from the first dose  
49 and median duration of response 10.5 (range 3.0-20.0) months. Retreatment with  
50 rituximab was successful in inducing repeat responses in relapsed complete  
51 responders [55]. Phase III data from the first-line setting (n=103 patients) have  
52 recently been reported: a combination of rituximab and dexamethasone achieved a  
53 response rate of 63%, versus 36% for dexamethasone alone (P = 0.004). This  
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1 combination provided an effective salvage therapy for 56% of patients who were  
2 refractory to dexamethasone [56].  
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5 Toxicities of rituximab include infusion reactions (headache, fever, chills,  
6 hypotension, bronchospasm), particularly with the first dose, severe mucocutaneous  
7 reactions, risk of hepatitis B reactivation and Progressive Multifocal  
8 Leukoencephalopathy (PML) [53] (**Table 1**). The overall risk of fatal adverse events  
9 is estimated at 2.9% [54]. PML, while rare, has an extremely high mortality rate of  
10 90% [57]. Concern regarding such events has led to warnings on the FDA[58] and  
11 EMEA [53] labelling. However, it is important to note that many of these events have  
12 occurred in heavily immunosuppressed lymphoma patients who were receiving other  
13 treatments.  
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23 A low-dose rituximab regimen (100mg weekly for 4 consecutive weeks) has been  
24 explored in ITP patients, with encouraging results [59, 60]. In one small series  
25 sustained complete response was achieved in four of 7 patients (57%) and no infusion  
26 reactions were seen [59]. In a slightly larger series overall and complete responses  
27 were achieved in 21/28 (75%) and 12/28 (43%) patients respectively [60]. Further  
28 studies are warranted to confirm these preliminary data, as a lower dose may be  
29 associated with a lower risk of toxicities.  
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### 38 *Other targeted agents under development*

39 Other targeted agents are being developed for ITP and these may expand the list of  
40 treatment options in the future. As well as additional TPO receptor agonists and B-  
41 cell-depleting agents, other approaches that are being studied include Syk kinase  
42 inhibitors [61], targeting of co-stimulatory signal (e.g the CD80/CD86 inhibitor  
43 CTLA-4-Ig [Abatacept]), B-cell survival signal, regulatory T-cells and macrophage  
44 FcγR function (reviewed by Li and Hou [62]).  
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## 53 **ARGUMENTS FOR EARLY SPLENECTOMY**

### 54 **1. We have a century of history and experience with splenectomy**

55 Splenectomy has been utilised to treat ‘idiopathic purpura’ since the early 1900s [9]  
56 and remained the ‘first-line, gold standard procedure’ until the 1950s, when steroids  
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1 were introduced [63]. While many additional medical therapies have since emerged,  
2 splenectomy remains the second-line treatment of choice for many physicians treating  
3 ITP.  
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## 7 **2. Splenectomy provides durable long-term responses for most patients and** 8 **responses can be predicted** 9

10 No other treatment has the overall success rate of splenectomy, with approximately  
11 two-thirds of patients achieving durable complete response [10, 17]. Vianelli et al.  
12 estimated a >70% probability of maintaining response for 5 years after surgery, based  
13 on their follow-up of 402 splenectomised patients [17].  
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20 <sup>111</sup>Indium-labelled autologous platelet scanning may provide a sensitive predictor of  
21 response [19, 64]. Among patients shown to have splenic platelet destruction,  
22 approximately 90% will respond to splenectomy, while a similar proportion of those  
23 with hepatic or diffuse platelet destruction fail splenectomy [19]. A good response to  
24 IVIg may predict a favourable response to splenectomy [20], as may younger age;  
25 higher peak platelet count at splenectomy and having received  $\leq 1$  previous therapy  
26 (all  $P < 0.0001$  by univariate analysis) [17].  
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## 34 **3. The safety profile of splenectomy is acceptable: immediate risks are known** 35 **and can be minimised** 36 37

38 Several advances in surgical practice over the years have led to a significant decrease  
39 in mortality and complication rates associated with splenectomy [10]. Predniso(lo)ne  
40 or IVIg can be given to raise the platelet count prior to surgery and thus reduce the  
41 risk of bleeding [2]. Laparoscopic splenectomy, introduced in 1991, has been  
42 associated with less blood loss, more rapid recovery and lower complication and  
43 mortality rate than open splenectomy [10, 15]. Preoperative vaccination and  
44 postoperative antibiotics have led to declining rates of fatal sepsis. Indeed, cases that  
45 have been reported occurred prior to the introduction of pneumococcal vaccination  
46 [2]. Results of two analyses (n = 402 and 208 patients, respectively) found that no  
47 cases of fatal sepsis have occurred in Italy [6, 17]. Overall, the risk of septicaemia  
48 following splenectomy may be less than the risk of intracranial haemorrhage in a  
49 nonsplenectomised ITP patient.  
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#### 4. Currently available medical treatments have limitations

In general, treatments used for ITP have considerable adverse effects, as summarised in **Table 1**. Elderly patients and those with comorbid conditions may be at greater risk.

Only a minority of patients with ITP achieve lasting remission with corticosteroids [65-68] and long-term treatment is associated with multiple well-documented, dose-related adverse effects, as well as an increased risk of infection [69, 70] (**Table 1**). Over time, these detrimental effects may outweigh their benefits. IVIg and Anti-D also produce only short-lasting responses and are associated with significant toxicities, as well as risks inherent to pooled blood products such as transmission of infections (**Table 1**).

Immunosuppressive agents (azathioprine, cyclosporine, cyclophosphamide) are not curative and often not well tolerated (**Table 1**). Suppressing the immune system may predispose patients to infection. Indeed, infections account for approximately half of all deaths in patients with ITP [6, 11]. Alkylating agents should be avoided in those who plan to have children and immunosuppressants should not be given to pregnant women. Cyclosporin A should be used very carefully in the elderly and avoided in those with renal insufficiency.

While the TPO mimetics look to be a promising treatment option, long-term data are limited, especially for eltrombopag, although 5-year safety and efficacy data have recently been reported for romiplostim [44]. In general, continued treatment is required to maintain the treatment response and rebound thrombocytopenia has been seen after stopping treatment. The clinical significance of increased bone marrow reticulin in patients treated with TPO mimetics [34, 43, 46] is yet to be clarified. Hepatotoxicity has been seen with eltrombopag [50] and monitoring of liver function is recommended during treatment [49]. Possible risks of TPO mimetics include thrombotic/thromboembolic complications if platelet counts exceed the normal range, although ITP itself may be associated with increased thromboembolic risk [71]. As these agents stimulate the TPO receptor there is also the theoretical possibility that they might stimulate progression of existing haematopoietic malignancies or Myelodysplastic Syndromes (MDS) [42, 49].

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2 In Europe, romiplostim is indicated for adult chronic immune (idiopathic)  
3 thrombocytopenic purpura (ITP) splenectomised patients who are refractory to other  
4 treatments (e.g. corticosteroids, immunoglobulins). Nplate may be considered as  
5 second-line treatment for adult non-splenectomised patients where surgery is contra-  
6 indicated [42, 49]. However, this is not the case in the USA, where both romiplostim  
7 and eltrombopag are available for use in patients with chronic ITP, regardless of  
8 splenectomy status [72, 73].  
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16 Data supporting the use of rituximab in chronic ITP are limited, being derived mainly  
17 from case series. Randomised controlled trials are required to establish the efficacy of  
18 the drug. Available data show long-term efficacy and safety concerns, with only a  
19 minority of patients maintaining a long-term response. Patel et al. found that almost  
20 half of patients with a response duration >1 year relapsed over a 5-year follow-up  
21 [74]. While reported toxicities (**Table 1**) have occurred mainly in patients being  
22 treated for lymphoma and the risk may be lower in ITP patients, the risk: benefit is  
23 likely to differ considerably between these two settings.  
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### 32 **5. Quality of life and cost issues.**

34 For patients who achieve an adequate platelet response to splenectomy, the disease  
35 burden is minimised, with less bleeding symptoms, fatigue, and concerns over  
36 everyday life. They may be free from ITP medication for years if the platelet response  
37 is maintained.  
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43 Clearly, financial considerations may impact the choice of treatment modality.  
44 Successful splenectomy is a once-only cost, provided that accessory spleen  
45 exploration is not required, and may be similar to that of a single course of IVIg [75].  
46 In contrast, immunosuppressive treatments usually need to be continued long-term,  
47 although dose reduction may be possible and some patients can even maintain long-  
48 term remissions off-therapy. With the TPO mimetics continued treatment is generally  
49 required to sustain the response [34].  
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1 Reimbursement will differ between countries and not all would reimburse for costly  
2 new medical treatments in a patient who refuses splenectomy. Additionally, in some  
3 developing countries, the range of available treatments may be restricted.  
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## 9 **Conclusions**

10 Generally accepted criteria for splenectomy in patients with chronic ITP include  
11 severe thrombocytopenia (platelet count  $<10 \times 10^9/L$ ) or platelet counts  $<30 \times 10^9/L$   
12 with high risk of bleeding; and the requirement for continuous corticosteroid therapy  
13 to maintain 'safe' platelet counts [76]. In 1996, George et al. [2] noted that there were  
14 'inadequate data to make evidence-based recommendations on the appropriate  
15 indications and timing for splenectomy, on when the benefits of splenectomy might  
16 outweigh its potential harms, and on appropriate preoperative management.'  
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25 Since that time, increasing clinical knowledge has allowed development of effective  
26 targeted therapies including the TPO mimetics. With these agents, it may be possible  
27 to 'buy time' for patients who are unable or unwilling to undergo splenectomy,  
28 maintaining a safe platelet count while allowing for a chance of spontaneous  
29 remission, and thereby deferring splenectomy for prolonged periods. Thus, some  
30 physicians argue that in general, this irreversible and immunocompromising  
31 procedure should not be performed before exhausting available medical treatment  
32 options. There are some exceptions, such as patients who wish to become pregnant,  
33 those who are 'sick of' or cannot receive medical treatments. With the emergence of  
34 new treatment options, it is likely that many well-informed patients will refuse  
35 splenectomy.  
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47 On the other hand, splenectomy does offer a very good chance of cure, with the  
48 possibility of being free from ITP medication for many years if the platelet response is  
49 maintained. With advances in surgical practice and management, the risks are well  
50 identified and acceptable. Progress has been made towards predicting which patients  
51 will respond, although testing is not widely available and predictors of response have  
52 not been fully validated. Moreover, new medical treatment options such as the TPO  
53 mimetics are now available for patients in whom splenectomy fails, as well as those in  
54 whom splenectomy is contraindicated.  
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2 Thus, the decision whether to proceed to splenectomy or try other medical therapies in  
3 corticosteroid-refractory patients remains patient-specific. There are no data to  
4 demonstrate better outcomes if this procedure is performed early on in the disease  
5 course and it is hoped that the treatment algorithm will become clearer in the near  
6 future as more information on newer treatments becomes available. Ultimately,  
7 identifying the ‘right patient at the right time’ requires careful weighing of the risks of  
8 splenectomy with the expected benefits for the individual, as well as full discussion  
9 with the patient.  
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### 17 **Acknowledgements**

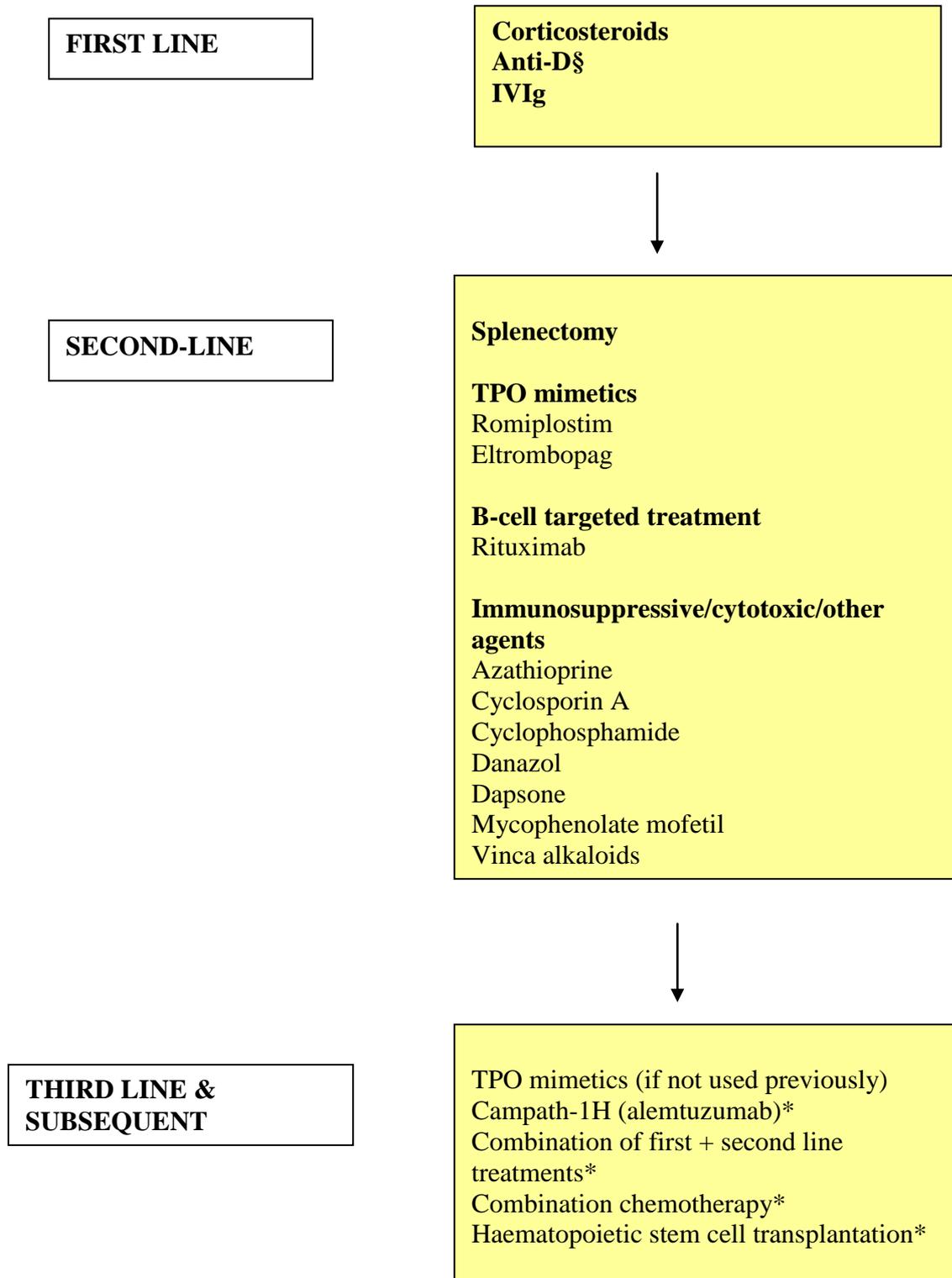
18 This article is based on a debate between the authors, which took place in Berlin,  
19 Germany on June 4th 2009 during the 14th European Haematology Association  
20 Congress and was supported by Amgen Europe GmbH, Zug, Switzerland. The authors  
21 thank Julia Balfour, Medical Writer, Kilconquhar, Scotland for assistance with the  
22 preparation of the manuscript, with financial support from Amgen.  
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### 31 **Conflicts of interest disclosures**

32 Authors conflict of interest declarations are as follows: Prof. Newland - Research  
33 funding from Amgen, Baxter, GSK and Genentech; consultant and speaker for  
34 Amgen and GSK; advisory board for GSK and Pangenetics; Dr. Stasi - advisory  
35 boards and/or speaker for GSK and Amgen. Dr Pabinger – speaker and advisory  
36 boards for Amgen and GSK. Dr Thornton has no conflicts of interest to declare.  
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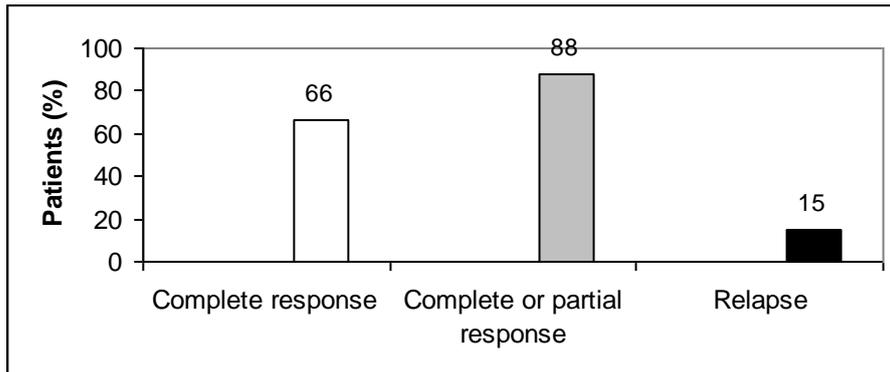
**Figure 1. Treatment options for chronic ITP.**

\* indicates treatments with minimal data and considered to have potential for considerable toxicity [3]. § The IV anti-D product Winrho SDF was withdrawn from the European market in 2009.



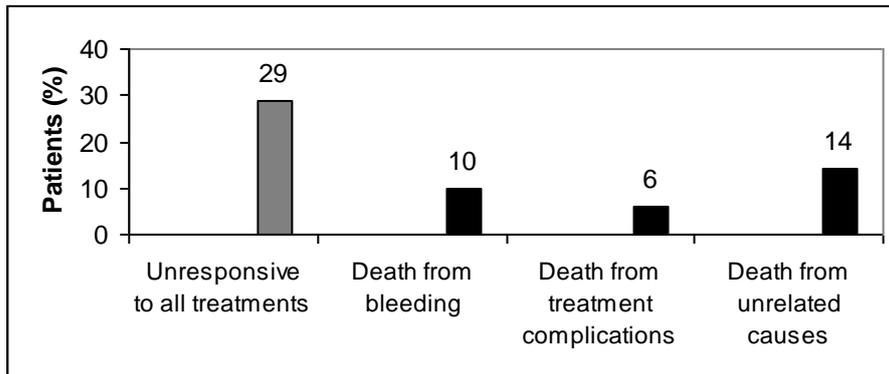
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**Figure 2. Response and relapse rates in patients undergoing splenectomy.**  
**Response rates shown are based on pooled data from 47 case series in a total of >2000 adults (n=2623 for complete response and 2116 for overall response analysis). Relapse rate (median shown) is based on 85 case series in 3355 adults and children (median follow-up 33 months) [10].**



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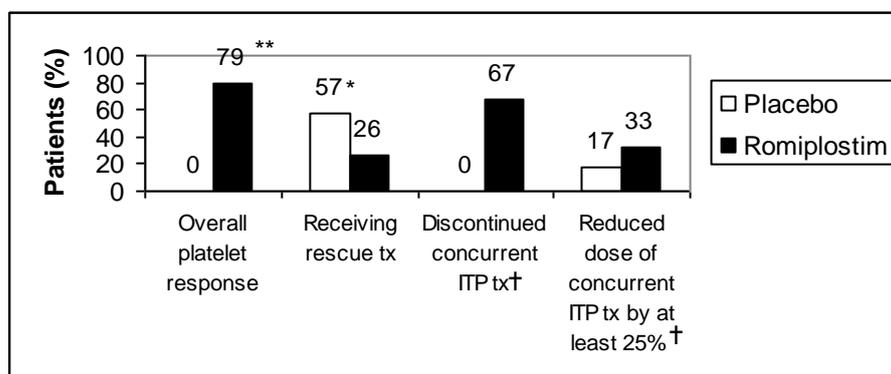
**Figure 3 . Death and non-response rates over a 12-year follow-up of patients with chronic ITP who failed splenectomy and required further treatment (n=105 for response analysis and n=108 for mortality analysis) [24]. (Note that the ‘unresponsive’ and ‘death’ categories are not mutually exclusive).**



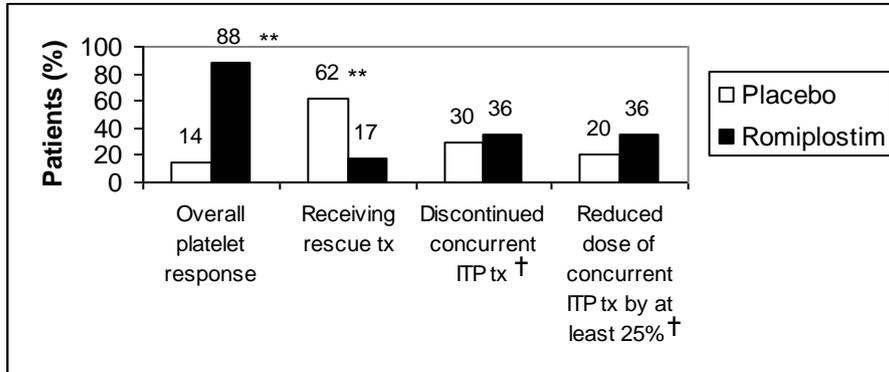
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**Figure 4. Results of two parallel phase III trials of romiplostim (starting dose 1 mcg/kg, adjusted to achieve and maintain a target platelet count of 50-200 x 10<sup>9</sup>/L) in (a) splenectomised and (b) nonsplenectomised patients with severe and chronic ITP (baseline platelet count 2-31 [median 16] x 10<sup>9</sup>/L) [34]. Overall platelet response was defined as a durable platelet response (platelet count ≥50 x 10<sup>9</sup>/L for ≥6 weeks of the last 8 weeks of treatment with no rescue medication used during the study) or ≥4 weekly platelet responses (≥50 x 10<sup>9</sup>/L) at any time during the study. \* P < 0.05; \*\* P < 0.01; † = expressed as a percentage of those taking concurrent ITP medication; tx = treatment.**

**(a) Splenectomised patients**



**(b) Nonsplenectomised patients**



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**Table 1. Summary of response rates and adverse effects associated with first and second-line treatments used for ITP. \*The IV anti-D product Winrho SDF was withdrawn from the market in 2009 because of safety concerns.**

Treatment	Initial response rates/time to response/duration of response [3]	Risks/adverse events
<b>First-line</b>		
Corticosteroids	70-80%/several days –several weeks/? <sup>a</sup>	Weight gain, cushingoidism, mood swings, insomnia, hypertension, osteoporosis, immunosuppression, increased risk of infection, peptic ulcer, hyperglycaemia, psychosis, glaucoma, cataract, impaired wound healing, skin changes, adrenal insufficiency [69]
IVIg	≤80%/2-4 days/2-4 weeks	Headache, fever, nausea/vomiting, allergic reactions/anaphylactic shock, hypotension; reversible haemolytic anaemia [77] Risks associated with pooled blood product e.g. transmission of infections
IV Anti-D	≤80%/4-5 days/3-4 weeks	Malaise, fever, chills, nausea/vomiting, anaphylaxis, cutaneous reactions, hypotension, tachycardia, life-threatening intravascular haemolysis [78, 79]* Risks associated with pooled blood product e.g. transmission of infections Restricted to Rhesus-positive, nonsplenectomised patients
<b>Second-line</b>		
Splenectomy	80%/1-24 days/5-10 years in 67% of patients	General risks of surgery (complications of general anaesthesia, bleeding, wound infection, thrombosis); perioperative complications: pneumonia, transient/prolonged ileus, need for transfusion, overwhelming post-splenectomy infection [10-13, 15, 80, 81] Long-term vascular complications: thromboembolism/atherosclerosis, pulmonary arterial hypertension [16, 24, 71, 82-84]

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<i>TPO mimetics</i>		
Romiplostim	Nonsplenectomised 88%; splenectomised 79%/1-4 weeks/sustained with continued administration	Romiplostim: arthralgia, dizziness, insomnia, myalgia, pain in extremity, abdominal pain, shoulder pain, dyspepsia, paraesthesia [72]. Eltrombopag: nausea, vomiting, menorrhagia, myalgia, paraesthesia. cataract, dyspepsia, hepatotoxicity [73].
Eltrombopag	59%/ 2 weeks/sustained with continued administration[43]	Both: rebound thrombocytopenia after stopping treatment, increased bone marrow reticulin, immunogenicity, Hypothetical risks: thrombotic/thromboembolic complications, progression of existing haematopoietic malignancies or Myelodysplastic Syndromes (MDS), alterations in blood cell parameters [34, 38, 39, 42, 43, 47, 50, 85, 86].
<i>B-cell targeted treatment</i>		
Rituximab	60%/1-8 weeks/variable	Infusion reactions on first infusion (fever, chills, rash, sore throat, bronchospasm, anaphylaxis, serum sickness) Risk of fatal adverse events (infusion reactions; severe mucocutaneous reactions; PML; hepatitis B reactivation) Contraindicated in those with active hepatitis B infection [53, 57, 58]
<i>Immunosuppressive/cytotoxic/other agents</i>		
Azathioprine	40-67%?/slow/≤25% have sustained response off therapy	Weakness, sweating, increased transaminases, severe neutropenia with infection[87-89]
Cyclophosphamide	24–85%/1-16 weeks/≤50% have sustained response	Neutropenia, acute deep venous thrombosis, nausea, vomiting, risk of secondary malignancies [90-94]
Cyclosporin A	50-80% in small studies/3–4 weeks/>50% of responders have sustained response at 2 years with low-dose treatment	Fatigue, renal insufficiency; hypertension, neuropathy, gingival hyperplasia, myalgia, dyspepsia, hypertrichosis, tremor Unsuitable for elderly and those with renal insufficiency [95, 96]

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Danazol	≤67%/3–6 months/?	Acne, hirsutism, elevated cholesterol, amenorrhea, increased transaminases [97]
Dapsone	≤50%/3 weeks/sustained response in ≥67% off treatment	Infrequent and treatable/reversible abdominal distension, anorexia, nausea, methaemoglobinuria; skin rash (may require discontinuation)[98] Risk of haemolytic anaemia in patients with G6PD deficiency [99]
Mycophenolate Mofetil	≤75%/4-6 weeks/short duration	Headache, backache, abdominal distension, anorexia, nausea. Long-term toxicities unknown [100]
Vinca alkaloids	Variable10-75%/5-7 days/?	Neuropathy, neutropenia, fever, infusion site reactions [101]

a. Data shown for prednisolone 0.5-2mg/kg for 2-4 weeks.

**PML** = Progressive Multifocal Leukoencephalopathy

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