

# Efficacy and safety of biological DMARDs: a systematic literature review informing the 2022 update of the ASAS-EULAR recommendations for the management of axial spondyloarthritis

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective** To update the evidence on efficacy and safety of biological disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (bDMARDs) in patients with axial spondyloarthritis (axSpA) to inform the 2022 update of the Assessment of SpondyloArthritis international Society/European Alliance of Associations for Rheumatology (ASAS-EULAR) recommendations for the management of axSpA.

**Methods** Systematic literature review (2016–2021) on efficacy and safety of bDMARDs in axSpA (radiographic axSpA (r-axSpA)/non-radiographic axSpA (nr-axSpA)). Eligible study designs included randomised controlled trials (RCTs), strategy trials and observational studies (the latter only for safety and extra-musculoskeletal manifestations). All relevant efficacy/safety outcomes were included.

**Results** In total, 148 publications were included. Efficacy of golimumab and certolizumab was confirmed. Tumour necrosis factor inhibitor (TNFi) biosimilar-originator equivalence was demonstrated. RCT (n=15) data on efficacy of interleukin-17 inhibitors (IL-17i) demonstrated clinically relevant effects (risk ratio vs placebo to achieve ASAS40 response 1.3–15.3 (r-axSpA, n=9), 1.4–2.1 (nr-axSpA, n=2)). Efficacy of secukinumab/ixekizumab was demonstrated in TNFi-naïve and TNFi-inadequate responders. IL-23 and IL-12/23 inhibitors (risankizumab/ustekinumab) failed to show relevant benefits. Tapering of TNFi by spacing was non-inferior to standard-dose treatment. The first axSpA treat-to-target trial did not meet its primary endpoint, but showed improvements in secondary outcomes. No new risks were identified with TNFi use in observational studies (data lacking for IL-17i). Secukinumab (n=1) and etanercept (n=2) were associated with increased risk of uveitis in observational studies compared to monoclonal TNFi.

**Conclusions** New evidence supports the efficacy and safety of TNFi (originators/biosimilars) and IL-17i in r-axSpA and nr-axSpA, while IL-23i failed to show relevant effects. Observational studies are needed to confirm long-term IL-17i safety.

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## INTRODUCTION

The primary goal of treatment of axial spondyloarthritis (axSpA) is to maximise health-related quality of life.<sup>1</sup> Biological disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (bDMARDs) play an important role in achieving this goal.<sup>2</sup> The introduction of

## Key messages

### What is already known on this topic

⇒ Since the 2016 update of the management recommendations for axial spondyloarthritis (axSpA), new evidence has emerged on the efficacy and safety of biological disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (bDMARDs) in axSpA. This systematic literature review was conducted to inform the taskforce of the 2022 update of the Assessment of SpondyloArthritis international Society/European Alliance of Associations for Rheumatology (ASAS-EULAR) recommendations for the management of axSpA on this topic.

### What this study adds

⇒ The efficacy of several interleukin-17 inhibitors (IL-17i) is confirmed in both radiographic axSpA and non-radiographic axSpA.  
 ⇒ Interleukin-23 and Interleukin-12/23 inhibitors have not been found to be efficacious in axSpA.  
 ⇒ Tapering of tumour necrosis factor inhibitors (TNFi) by spacing is not inferior to standard-dose treatment in patients with sustained remission.  
 ⇒ Monoclonal TNFi are associated with reduced risk of anterior uveitis, compared to TNF receptor protein (etanercept) and IL-17i (secukinumab).

### How this study might affect research, practice or policy

⇒ This review informed the 2022 ASAS-EULAR management recommendations for axSpA, highlighting new evidence on efficacy and safety of existing and new bDMARDs.

tumour necrosis factor inhibitors (TNFi), as the first bDMARDs in axSpA, signalled a new era in the management of this disease. Until then, pharmacological treatment of axSpA had been limited mostly to non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), which remained limited in their effectiveness.<sup>3</sup> TNFi showed efficacy in patients with radiographic axSpA (r-axSpA), who failed to respond or were intolerant to NSAIDs. However, they are costly and

not without harm. Thus, guidance on their use was essential. The first consensus statement on the use of TNFi in r-axSpA was published by the Assessment of SpondyloArthritis international Society (ASAS) in 2003.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, these recommendations were updated regularly,<sup>5,6</sup> as were the ASAS-European Alliance of Associations for Rheumatology (EULAR) recommendations for management of r-axSpA.<sup>7,8</sup> In 2016, all aspects of management were incorporated in a single set of recommendations for the entire spectrum of axSpA.<sup>1</sup>

Since the publication of the systematic literature review (SLR) informing the 2016 update of these management recommendations,<sup>9</sup> a substantial number of studies on bDMARD therapy in axSpA have been published. Large, international trials of new drugs have been conducted, expanding the number of therapeutic possibilities, including new interleukin-17 inhibitors (IL-17i). Also, we have witnessed the first trial on a treat-to-target (T2T) intervention in axSpA. In addition, more studies on biosimilar TNFi were carried out as well as on tapering strategies for bDMARDs. Finally, additional observational studies were performed to assess the safety of bDMARDs in axSpA, as well as their effect on extra-musculoskeletal manifestations (EMMs). The latter takes particular relevance as it represents a distinguishing factor in disease manifestations and one that impacts on disease assessment, treatment and outcomes.<sup>10</sup>

In this manuscript, we present an SLR investigating the evidence on the efficacy and safety of bDMARDs in the entire spectrum of axSpA (r-axSpA and non-radiographic axSpA (nr-axSpA)). This SLR was undertaken in parallel with an SLR on non-pharmacological and non-biological (including targeted synthetic DMARDs) interventions (presented in a review by Ortolan *et al*),<sup>11</sup> to inform the 2022 update of the ASAS-EULAR management recommendations for axSpA.<sup>12</sup>

## METHODS

The study protocol for this SLR was preregistered in PROSPERO.<sup>13</sup>

### Eligibility criteria and literature search

The scope of the SLR and eligibility criteria for studies were defined using the PICO (Population/Intervention/Comparator/Outcome) framework. The target population was adults with a clinical diagnosis of axSpA (r-axSpA or nr-axSpA). If a study also included other diagnoses, it was eligible only if results were reported separately for axSpA. Eligible interventions were any bDMARD therapy (bio-originator or biosimilar), including TNFi, IL-17i, interleukin-23 and interleukin-12/23 inhibitors (IL-23i and IL-12/23i), in any formulation and duration. Strategy studies that involved bDMARDs were also eligible. Comparators were defined as the same bDMARD in a different dose/regimen, another bDMARD, any non-bDMARD drug treatment, combination of bDMARD with non-bDMARD treatment, placebo or none (for safety only, if population-based incidence rates were reported).

Outcomes focused on (a) efficacy and (b) safety. For efficacy, the following outcomes were included: ASAS response criteria (ASAS20, ASAS40, ASAS5/6 and partial remission), disease activity (Ankylosing Spondylitis Disease Activity Score: absolute change, response criteria (clinically important improvement ( $\Delta \geq 1.1$ ), major improvement ( $\Delta \geq 2.0$ )), states (inactive disease ( $< 1.3$ ), low disease activity ( $< 2.1$ )); Bath Ankylosing Spondylitis Disease Activity Index (BASDAI): absolute change, response ( $\geq 50\%$  improvement); patient's global assessment of disease activity), day/night pain, spinal mobility (Bath

Ankylosing Spondylitis Metrology Index; individual spinal mobility measures), physical function (Bath Ankylosing Spondylitis Functional Index), peripheral manifestations (enthesitis; swollen/tender joint count), functioning and health (ASAS Health Index (ASAS HI)), radiographic damage (modified Stoke AS Spine Score; radiographic sacroiliitis according to modified New York criteria), inflammation on MRI (active sacroiliitis according to ASAS/Outcome Measures in Rheumatology (OMERACT) definition; Spondyloarthritis Research Consortium of Canada (SPARCC) for sacroiliac joints and spine), work disability and productivity. In addition, EMMs (psoriasis, acute anterior uveitis (AAU), inflammatory bowel disease (IBD)) were added as an efficacy outcome for the current SLR. For safety, the following outcomes were included: serious adverse events (AEs), withdrawals due to AEs, deaths, infections, malignancies, congestive heart failure, cardiovascular disease, infusion/injection-site reactions, lipid levels, renal function, hepatic effects, haematological abnormalities, gastrointestinal effects and demyelinating disease.

Randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and controlled clinical trials (CCTs) were considered for both efficacy and safety. Open-label/long-term extensions of RCTs (OLE/LTEs), and observational cohort studies were considered for safety but not efficacy (except EMMs, see below). Cohort studies were eligible if they had a comparator group or reported population-based standardised incidence rates, and included at least 50 participants per group (observational studies with less than 50 participants per group were considered if they provided relevant evidence). Cohort studies were also considered for EMMs, as the effect of drugs on EMMs is often investigated in observational designs and it was felt that relevant evidence would be excluded otherwise. SLRs and meta-analyses were not included, with the exception of Cochrane reviews. Studies with a qualitative design were eligible for efficacy and safety, provided they made some form of comparison between treatments.

The search was conducted by an experienced librarian (LF) in the relevant electronic databases (MEDLINE, Embase, The Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, The Cochrane CENTRAL Register of Controlled Trials, Epistemonikos) for the period from 1 January 2016 to 31 December 2021. EULAR and American College of Rheumatology (ACR) conference abstract databases from the last 2 years (2020 and 2021) were also searched. The primary search strategy focused on bDMARDs (online supplemental text S1). In addition, separate searches on non-bDMARD therapies for axSpA were carried out for a related SLR (online supplemental text S2–S4).<sup>11</sup> If these separate searches yielded any records that were relevant for the current review, these were included. No restrictions in language were applied.

### Study selection, data extraction and risk of bias assessment

Screening, data extraction and risk of bias (RoB) assessment were each conducted by two reviewers (CW/AO) for 20% of the records, and agreement between them was checked. As agreement was sufficient ( $\kappa >$  predefined threshold of 0.90), a single reviewer (CW) carried out the screening, data extraction and RoB assessment for the remaining titles and abstracts. Any disagreement between reviewers was discussed for consensus, and resolved with the methodologists (EN and AS) if necessary.

After screening of titles and abstracts, definitive inclusion was confirmed by full-text review. Data were extracted using a predefined data extraction sheet. Data were extracted on general study characteristics, inclusion and exclusion criteria,

**Table 1** Effect of TNFi on ASAS20, ASAS40, ASDAS and BASFI in patients with axSpA in placebo-controlled RCTs

| Dichotomous outcome |                         |                  |     |                    |                           |                         |                       |              |              |
|---------------------|-------------------------|------------------|-----|--------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|--------------|--------------|
| Drug*               | Study                   | Population       | N   | Time point (weeks) | Response treatment (%)    | Response placebo (%)    | RR (95% CI)           | NNT          | Risk of bias |
| ASAS20              |                         |                  |     |                    |                           |                         |                       |              |              |
| Adalimumab          | ASIM <sup>18</sup>      | axSpA            | 49  | 6                  | 52                        | 17                      | 3.1 (1.2 to 8.2)      | 2.8          | Unclear      |
| Golimumab           | GO-ALIVE <sup>17</sup>  | r-axSpA          | 208 | 16                 | 73                        | 26                      | 2.8 (2.0 to 3.9)      | 2.1          | Low          |
| Certolizumab        | C-axSpAnd <sup>19</sup> | nr-axSpA         | 317 | 52                 | -                         | -                       | -                     | -            | Low          |
| Etanercept          | PrevAS <sup>20</sup>    | Suspected axSpA† | 80  | 16                 | 17                        | 11                      | 1.5 (0.5 to 4.9)      | 18.0         | Unclear      |
| ASAS40              |                         |                  |     |                    |                           |                         |                       |              |              |
| Adalimumab          | ASIM <sup>18</sup>      | axSpA            | 49  | 6                  | 48                        | 4                       | 11.5 (1.6 to 81.9)    | 2.3          | Unclear      |
| Golimumab           | GO-ALIVE <sup>17</sup>  | r-axSpA          | 208 | 16                 | 48                        | 9                       | 5.4 (2.8 to 10.5)     | 2.6          | Low          |
| Certolizumab        | C-axSpAnd <sup>19</sup> | nr-axSpA         | 317 | 52                 | 57                        | 16                      | 3.6 (2.4 to 5.3)      | 2.5          | Low          |
| Etanercept          | PrevAS <sup>20</sup>    | Suspected axSpA† | 80  | 16                 | 8                         | 8                       | 1.0 (0.2 to 4.6)      | ‡            | Unclear      |
| Continuous Outcome  |                         |                  |     |                    |                           |                         |                       |              |              |
| Drug*               | Study                   | Population       | N   | Time point (weeks) | Impr. treatment mean (SD) | Impr. placebo mean (SD) | SMD (95% CI)          | Risk of bias |              |
| ΔASDAS§             |                         |                  |     |                    |                           |                         |                       |              |              |
| Adalimumab          | ASIM <sup>18</sup>      | axSpA            | 49  | 6                  | -                         | -                       | -                     | Unclear      |              |
| Golimumab           | GO-ALIVE <sup>17</sup>  | r-axSpA          | 208 | 16                 | 2.0 (1.0)                 | 0.4 (0.8)               | 1.77 (1.44 to 2.08)   | Low          |              |
| Certolizumab        | C-axSpAnd <sup>19</sup> | nr-axSpA         | 317 | 52                 | -                         | -                       | -                     | Low          |              |
| Etanercept          | PrevAS <sup>20</sup>    | Suspected axSpA† | 80  | 16                 | 0.3 (0.9)                 | 0.6 (1.5)               | -0.24 (-0.70 to 0.22) | Unclear      |              |
| ΔBASFI§             |                         |                  |     |                    |                           |                         |                       |              |              |
| Adalimumab          | ASIM <sup>18</sup>      | axSpA            | 49  | 6                  | 2.3 (1.9)                 | 0.2 (1.3)               | 1.29 (0.65 to 1.88)   | Unclear      |              |
| Golimumab           | GO-ALIVE <sup>17</sup>  | r-axSpA          | 208 | 16                 | 2.4 (2.1)                 | 0.5 (2.0)               | 0.93 (0.64 to 1.21)   | Low          |              |
| Certolizumab        | C-axSpAnd <sup>19</sup> | nr-axSpA         | 317 | 52                 | -                         | -                       | -                     | Low          |              |
| Etanercept          | PrevAS <sup>20</sup>    | Suspected axSpA† | 80  | 16                 | -                         | -                       | -                     | Unclear      |              |

Some studies did not report on the outcomes presented above (indicated with a '-').

\*Dose for each study: adalimumab 40 mg Q2W (ASIM), golimumab 2 mg/kg Q8W intravenously (GO-ALIVE), certolizumab pegol 200 mg Q2W (C-axSpAnd) and etanercept 25 mg TW (PrevAS).

†Suspicion of nr-axSpA, no objective sign of inflammation (positive MRI of sacroiliac joints or increased C-reactive protein) required.

‡NNT could not be estimated (no treatment difference).

§Mean improvement compared to baseline.

ASAS, Assessment of SpondyloArthritis international Society; ASDAS, Ankylosing Spondylitis Disease Activity Score; axSpA, axial spondyloarthritis; BASFI, Bath Ankylosing Spondylitis Functional Index; Impr, improvement; NNT, number needed to treat; nr-axSpA, non-radiographic axSpA; Q2W, every 2 weeks; r-axSpA, radiographic axSpA; RCTs, randomised controlled trials; RR, risk ratio; SMD, standardised mean difference; TNFi, tumour necrosis factor inhibitor; TW, twice a week.

key methodological aspects around study design, study population demographics and disease characteristics, intervention and comparator characteristics and relevant outcomes. For EMMs, this included the history of EMMs at baseline and the number or incidence of (new-onset/recurrent) EMMs during follow-up.

RoB was assessed using V.2 of the Cochrane RoB tool (RoB 2) for RCTs and the Quality In Prognosis Studies tool for observational studies.<sup>14–16</sup> Overall RoB for each study was expressed as 'low', 'unclear' or 'high'. Conference abstracts were considered as 'unknown' RoB due to lack of information.

### Data synthesis

For quantitative synthesis, descriptive statistics were generated on extracted data. No meta-analyses were conducted due to clinical and methodological heterogeneity. As measures of treatment effects, standardised mean difference (mean difference between intervention and comparator divided by pooled SD) with 95% CI were calculated for continuous outcomes, while risk ratios (RR) and number needed to treat (NNT) were calculated for dichotomous outcomes. For readability purposes, tables in this report only present new evidence (published from 2016). For a comprehensive overview of bDMARD efficacy and safety in

axSpA, this manuscript should be read together with the previous SLR from 2016.<sup>9</sup>

### RESULTS

The search yielded 17 480 records after de-duplication, of which 502 were selected for detailed review. Finally, 91 articles and 57 conference abstracts were included (146 from the search and 2 from reference checks) (online supplemental figure S1). These included 36 RCTs that were first published after the previous SLR, of which 16 (44%) assessed TNFi (10 originator, 6 biosimilar; including 3 trials on discontinuation and 2 on tapering), 15 (42%) IL-17i (including 1 trial on discontinuation), 4 (11%) IL-12/23i and 1 trial with any bDMARD (online supplemental table S2.1). From these, 18 trials included patients with r-axSpA (50%), while 7 (19%) and 11 (31%) included patients with nr-axSpA and axSpA (r-axSpA + nr-axSpA), respectively (online supplemental table S2.2). OLE/LTE results were available for nine RCTs that were already included in the previous SLR (online supplemental table S2.3). Altogether, 121 records provided data on RCTs and OLE/LTE. In addition, 27 observational studies (16 on safety, 9 on EMMs and 2 on both) were included (online supplemental tables S2.4–S2.6). No qualitative studies met the inclusion criteria.

Table 2 Effect of IL-17i on ASAS20 and ASAS40 in patients with axSpA

| Outcome     |                                |            |     |                    |                |                        |                      |                    |      |              |
|-------------|--------------------------------|------------|-----|--------------------|----------------|------------------------|----------------------|--------------------|------|--------------|
| Drug        | Study                          | Population | N   | Time point (weeks) | Dose           | Response treatment (%) | Response placebo (%) | RR (95% CI)        | NNT  | Risk of bias |
| ASAS20      |                                |            |     |                    |                |                        |                      |                    |      |              |
| Secukinumab | SKIPPAIN <sup>32</sup>         | axSpA      | 375 | 8                  | 150 mg Q4W LD  | -                      | -                    | -                  | -    | Low          |
|             | ACHILLES <sup>29</sup>         | axSpA*     | 76  | 24                 | 150 mg Q4W LD  | -                      | -                    | -                  | -    | Low          |
|             | MEASURE 3 <sup>26</sup>        | r-axSpA    | 226 | 16                 | 300 mg Q4W LD  | 61                     | 37                   | 1.6 (1.2 to 2.3)   | 4.2  | Unclear      |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 150 mg Q4W LD  | 58                     | -                    | 1.6 (1.1 to 2.2)   | 4.7  | -            |
|             | MEASURE 4 <sup>27</sup>        | r-axSpA    | 350 | 16                 | 150 mg Q4W LD  | 59                     | 47                   | 1.3 (1.0 to 1.6)   | 8.0  | Low          |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 150 mg Q4W NL  | 62                     | -                    | 1.3 (1.0 to 1.7)   | 6.9  | -            |
|             | MEASURE 5 <sup>28</sup>        | r-axSpA    | 448 | 16                 | 150 mg Q4W LD  | 58                     | 37                   | 1.6 (1.3 to 2.0)   | 4.6  | Low          |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 150 mg Q4W NL  | 58                     | 37                   | 1.6 (1.3 to 2.0)   | 4.6  | Low          |
|             | ASTRUM <sup>31†</sup>          | r-axSpA    | 211 | 12                 | 150 mg Q4W W0‡ | 51 (pooled)            | 44                   | 1.2 (0.8 to 1.6)   | 14.8 | Unknown      |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 150 mg Q4W W4‡ | -                      | -                    | -                  | -    | -            |
|             | PREVENT <sup>30</sup>          | nr-axSpA   | 555 | 16                 | 150 mg Q4W LD  | 57                     | 46                   | 1.2 (1.0 to 1.5)   | 9.0  | Low          |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 150 mg Q4W NL  | 58                     | -                    | 1.3 (1.0 to 1.6)   | 8.0  | -            |
| Ixekizumab  | COAST-V <sup>33§</sup>         | r-axSpA    | 251 | 16                 | 80mg Q2W       | 69                     | 40                   | 1.7 (1.3 to 2.3)   | 3.5  | Low          |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 80 mg Q4W      | 64                     | -                    | 1.6 (1.2 to 2.2)   | 4.2  | -            |
|             | COAST-W <sup>34</sup>          | r-axSpA¶   | 316 | 16                 | 80 mg Q2W      | 47                     | 30                   | 1.6 (1.1 to 2.3)   | 5.8  | Low          |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 80 mg Q4W      | 48                     | -                    | 1.6 (1.1 to 2.3)   | 5.4  | -            |
|             | COAST-X <sup>35</sup>          | nr-axSpA   | 303 | 16                 | 80 mg Q2W      | -                      | -                    | -                  | -    | Low          |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 80 mg Q4W      | -                      | -                    | -                  | -    | -            |
| Bimekizumab | BE-AGILE <sup>38</sup>         | r-axSpA    | 303 | 12                 | 16 mg Q4W      | 41                     | 28                   | 1.4 (0.9 to 2.4)   | 7.9  | Low          |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 64 mg Q4W      | 62                     | -                    | 2.2 (1.4 to 3.4)   | 2.9  | -            |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 160 mg Q4W     | 58                     | -                    | 2.1 (1.3 to 3.2)   | 3.3  | -            |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 320 mg Q4W     | 72                     | -                    | 2.5 (1.7 to 3.9)   | 2.3  | -            |
| Netakimab   | AILAS <sup>36</sup>            | r-axSpA    | 88  | 16                 | 40mg Q2W       | 73                     | 43                   | 1.8 (1.0 to 3.1)   | 3.1  | Unclear      |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 80 mg Q2W      | 82                     | -                    | 2.0 (1.2 to 3.4)   | 2.4  | -            |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 120mg Q2W      | 91                     | -                    | 2.2 (1.3 to 3.7)   | 2.0  | -            |
|             | ASTERA <sup>37</sup>           | r-axSpA    | 228 | 16                 | 120 mg Q2W     | 61                     | 3                    | 23.0 (7.5 to 70.9) | 1.7  | Unclear      |
| Brodalumab  | Wei <i>et al</i> <sup>39</sup> | axSpA      | 159 | 16                 | 210 mg Q2W     | 68                     | 42                   | 1.6 (1.2 to 2.2)   | 3.9  | Low          |
| ASAS40      |                                |            |     |                    |                |                        |                      |                    |      |              |
| Secukinumab | SKIPPAIN <sup>32</sup>         | axSpA      | 375 | 8                  | 150 mg Q4W LD  | -                      | -                    | -                  | -    | Low          |
|             | ACHILLES <sup>29</sup>         | axSpA*     | 76  | 24                 | 150 mg Q4W LD  | -                      | -                    | -                  | -    | Low          |
|             | MEASURE 3 <sup>26</sup>        | r-axSpA    | 226 | 16                 | 300 mg Q4W LD  | 42                     | 21                   | 2.0 (1.2 to 3.3)   | 4.8  | Unclear      |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 150 mg Q4W LD  | 41                     | -                    | 1.9 (1.2 to 3.2)   | 5.1  | -            |
|             | MEASURE 4 <sup>27</sup>        | r-axSpA    | 350 | 16                 | 150 mg Q4W LD  | 39                     | 28                   | 1.4 (1.0 to 2.0)   | 9.4  | Low          |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 150 mg Q4W NL  | 36                     | -                    | 1.3 (0.9 to 1.9)   | 13.0 | -            |
|             | MEASURE 5 <sup>28</sup>        | r-axSpA    | 448 | 16                 | 150mg Q4W LD   | 44                     | 17                   | 2.6 (1.8 to 3.8)   | 3.7  | Low          |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 150 mg Q4W NL  | 44                     | 17                   | 2.6 (1.8 to 3.8)   | 3.7  | Low          |
|             | ASTRUM <sup>31†</sup>          | r-axSpA    | 211 | 16                 | 150 mg Q4W W0‡ | 44                     | 21                   | 2.0 (1.2 to 3.4)   | 4.5  | Unknown      |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 150 mg Q4W W4‡ | 33                     | -                    | 1.5 (0.9 to 2.7)   | 8.8  | -            |
|             | PREVENT <sup>30</sup>          | nr-axSpA   | 555 | 16                 | 150 mg Q4W LD  | 40                     | 28                   | 1.4 (1.1 to 1.9)   | 8.3  | Low          |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 150 mg Q4W NL  | 41                     | -                    | 1.5 (1.1 to 1.9)   | 7.8  | -            |
| Ixekizumab  | COAST-V <sup>33§</sup>         | r-axSpA    | 251 | 16                 | 80 mg Q2W      | 52                     | 18                   | 2.8 (1.7 to 4.6)   | 3.0  | Low          |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 80 mg Q4W      | 48                     | -                    | 2.6 (1.6 to 4.3)   | 3.4  | -            |
|             | COAST-W <sup>34</sup>          | r-axSpA¶   | 316 | 16                 | 80 mg Q2W      | 31                     | 13                   | 2.4 (1.4 to 4.4)   | 5.5  | Low          |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 80 mg Q4W      | 25                     | -                    | 2.0 (1.1 to 3.7)   | 7.7  | -            |
|             | COAST-X <sup>35</sup>          | nr-axSpA   | 303 | 16                 | 80 mg Q2W      | 40                     | 19                   | 2.1 (1.3 to 3.3)   | 4.7  | Low          |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 80 mg Q4W      | 35                     | -                    | 1.9 (1.2 to 3.0)   | 6.1  | -            |
| Bimekizumab | BE-AGILE <sup>38</sup>         | r-axSpA    | 303 | 12                 | 16 mg Q4W      | 30                     | 13                   | 2.2 (1.0 to 4.7)   | 6.2  | Low          |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 64 mg Q4W      | 43                     | -                    | 3.2 (1.6 to 6.5)   | 3.4  | -            |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 160 mg Q4W     | 47                     | -                    | 3.5 (1.7 to 7.0)   | 3.0  | -            |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 320 mg Q4W     | 46                     | -                    | 3.4 (1.7 to 6.9)   | 3.1  | -            |
| Netakimab   | AILAS <sup>36</sup>            | r-axSpA    | 88  | 16                 | 40 mg Q2W      | 41                     | 14                   | 3.0 (0.9 to 9.6)   | 3.7  | Unclear      |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 80 mg Q2W      | 64                     | -                    | 4.7 (1.6 to 14.0)  | 2.0  | -            |
|             |                                |            |     |                    | 120 mg Q2W     | 73                     | -                    | 5.3 (1.8 to 15.7)  | 1.7  | -            |
|             | ASTERA <sup>37</sup>           | r-axSpA    | 228 | 16                 | 120 mg Q2W     | 40                     | 3                    | 15.3 (4.9 to 47.9) | 2.7  | Unclear      |
| Brodalumab  | Wei <i>et al</i> <sup>39</sup> | axSpA      | 159 | 16                 | 210 mg Q2W     | 44                     | 24                   | 1.8 (1.1 to 2.9)   | 5.1  | Low          |

Continued

Table 2 Continued

| Outcome   | Drug | Study | Population | N | Time point (weeks) | Dose | Response treatment (%) | Response placebo (%) | RR (95% CI) | NNT | Risk of bias |
|---|------|-------|------------|---|--------------------|------|------------------------|----------------------|-------------|-----|--------------|
| Some studies did not report on the outcomes presented above (indicated with a '-').   |      |       |            |   |                    |      |                        |                      |             |     |              |
| *With heel enthesitis at time of inclusion.   |      |       |            |   |                    |      |                        |                      |             |     |              |
| †Secukinumab or placebo with an initial 4 week stable NSAID run-in period, followed by (optional) NSAID tapering from week 4.   |      |       |            |   |                    |      |                        |                      |             |     |              |
| ‡Secukinumab initiated in week 0 (WO → SEC initiated 4 weeks before optional NSAID tapering; 'delayed tapering') or week 4 (W4, after 4 weeks of placebo → SEC initiated at time of optional NSAID tapering; 'early tapering').   |      |       |            |   |                    |      |                        |                      |             |     |              |
| §Also included a treatment arm with adalimumab treatment (n=90, not included in sample size reported in table above), which served as in-study active reference for comparison with placebo to provide additional context to interpretation of the ixekizumab study results.  |      |       |            |   |                    |      |                        |                      |             |     |              |
| ¶With inadequate response to at least one TNFi.   |      |       |            |   |                    |      |                        |                      |             |     |              |
| ASAS, Assessment of SpondyloArthritis International Society; axSpA, axial spondyloarthritis; IL-17i, interleukin-17 inhibitors; LD, loading dose; NL, no loading dose; NNT, number needed to treat; nr-axSpA, non-radiographic axSpA; NSAID, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug; Q4W, every 4 weeks; r-axSpA, radiographic axSpA; RR, risk ratio; TNFi, tumour necrosis factor inhibitor. |      |       |            |   |                    |      |                        |                      |             |     |              |

## Efficacy of bDMARDs

### Efficacy of TNFi

Four RCTs of originator TNFi versus placebo were included (table 1, online supplemental tables S3.1–S3.10).<sup>17–20</sup> Two studies with low RoB confirmed the efficacy of golimumab intravenously in r-axSpA and certolizumab in nr-axSpA (ASAS40 47.6% for golimumab vs 8.7 for placebo (NNT 2.6); 56.6% for certolizumab vs 15.8 for placebo (NNT 2.5)).<sup>17 19</sup> One study of adalimumab in axSpA with a focus on imaging outcomes partially met its primary outcome (whole-body MRI smallest detectable change of  $\geq 2.3$  units met (44% vs 13%); SPARCC spine improvement of  $\geq 5$  units not met (36% vs 17%) after 6 weeks) and met several secondary outcomes (eg, ASAS40 48% for adalimumab vs 4% for placebo).<sup>18</sup> Finally, a trial of etanercept versus placebo in patients with 'suspected axSpA' (no objective signs of inflammation required) was negative.<sup>20</sup> Only one small study at high risk of bias compared originator TNFi with an active control (online supplemental tables S3.11–S3.20).<sup>21</sup> No RCTs tested the efficacy of TNFi in TNFi-experienced patients or infliximab in nr-axSpA.

Comparable efficacy and safety of biosimilars and originators was confirmed in four trials of adalimumab, etanercept and infliximab biosimilars (online supplemental tables S3.21–S3.36).<sup>22–25</sup>

### Efficacy of IL-17i

In total, 14 placebo-controlled trials assessed the efficacy of IL-17i (table 2, online supplemental tables S3.37–S3.66).<sup>26–39</sup> Patients with r-axSpA on secukinumab showed greater improvement compared to placebo in two phase III trials (ASAS20 58.1–60.5% vs 36.6–36.8%, low/unclear RoB).<sup>26 28</sup> Another phase III trial at low RoB saw numerically higher response rates for secukinumab compared to placebo in patients with r-axSpA, although results were not statistically significant (ASAS20 59.5–61.5% vs 47.0%) (table 3).<sup>27</sup> For the first time, the efficacy of secukinumab was shown in nr-axSpA, both with loading dose (LD) (ASAS40 41.5% vs 29.2%) and without LD (39.8% vs 19.9%) (table 3).<sup>30</sup> In both r-axSpA and nr-axSpA, response to secukinumab was higher compared to placebo in patients who were TNFi-naïve and in patients with prior inadequate response to TNFi (TNFi-IR), with higher rates in the TNFi-naïve (ASAS40 38.8–43.9% vs 28.1–36.8%) (table 3, online supplemental figure S2).<sup>26–28 30</sup>

Three phase III trials assessed the efficacy of ixekizumab, all at low RoB (table 2).<sup>33–35</sup> In two of these on patients with r-axSpA, one including TNFi-naïve and the other TNFi-IR patients, ixekizumab was superior to placebo after 16 weeks (ASAS40 48–52% vs 18% for TNFi-naïve; 25–31% versus 13% for TNFi-IR).<sup>33 34</sup> Similar results were seen in a trial of patients with nr-axSpA who were TNFi-naïve (ASAS40 35–40% for ixekizumab vs 19% for placebo).<sup>35</sup>

Evidence on several newer IL-17i has also emerged in the past couple of years (table 2).<sup>38 39</sup> In a phase III trial with low RoB, brodalumab was superior to placebo in axSpA after 16 weeks (ASAS40 43.8% vs 24.1%).<sup>39</sup> A phase II dose-ranging study of bimekizumab, which neutralises both IL-17A and IL-17F, found response rates higher than with placebo in r-axSpA (ASAS40 29.5–45.9% vs 13.3%, low RoB).<sup>38</sup> Finally, netakimab was found to be efficacious in two phase II/III trials with unclear RoB, in patients with r-axSpA (ASAS40 40.4–72.7% vs 2.6–14.3%).<sup>36 37</sup>

### Efficacy of IL-23i and IL-12/23i

Four trials investigated the efficacy and safety of IL-23i (risankizumab) and IL-12/23i (ustekinumab), all with negative results (online supplemental tables S3.67–S3.76).<sup>40 41</sup> Risankizumab was not superior to placebo in r-axSpA in a phase II study with low RoB (ASAS40 15.0–25.0% for various risankizumab doses vs 17.5% for placebo).<sup>40</sup> Ustekinumab failed in TNFi-naïve patients with r-axSpA in a phase III study with low RoB (ASAS40 28.1–31.0% for ustekinumab vs 28.4% for placebo).<sup>41</sup> These findings led to discontinuation of this study, as well as premature discontinuation of two ongoing phase III trials of ustekinumab.<sup>41</sup>

### Strategy trials including discontinuation or tapering of bDMARDs

One cluster-randomised RCT compared a tight-control (TC)/T2T intervention with usual care.<sup>42</sup> The primary endpoint was not met ( $\geq 30\%$  improvement in ASAS HI; 47.3% for TC/T2T vs 36.1% for usual care), but several secondary outcomes, such as ASAS20 and ASAS40 response, were significantly better in the TC/T2T strategy group (online supplemental tables S4.1–S4.10).

In the previous SLR, studies that investigated discontinuation of TNFi did not include a comparator arm. Since then, three studies on TNFi discontinuation with a comparator were conducted (table 4, online supplemental tables S4.11–S4.21).<sup>43–45</sup> In these three trials with low or unknown RoB, discontinuation of certolizumab (axSpA), adalimumab or etanercept (both nr-axSpA) in patients who were in remission resulted in a substantially higher rates of flare after 40–48 weeks than continuation (52.9–79.8% vs 16.3–29.6%).

Two non-inferiority trials investigated tapering of TNFi in patients with axSpA (online supplemental tables S4.22–S4.31).<sup>46 47</sup> In line with the findings of the previous SLR, spacing of TNFi (adalimumab, certolizumab, etanercept, golimumab, infliximab) was non-inferior to standard-dose continuation with regard to maintaining low disease activity (BASDAI < 4/10) after 1 year (88.0% vs 91.5%, respectively).<sup>46</sup> Similarly, a combination of spacing and dose reduction of TNFi (adalimumab, etanercept, golimumab, infliximab) resulted in comparable rates of low disease activity after 1 year (81.3% vs 83.6%, respectively).<sup>47</sup>

**Table 3** Effect of IL-17i on ASAS20 and ASAS40 according to prior TNFi experience at baseline in patients with r-axSpA and nr-axSpA

| Drug          | Study                                 | Population | Time point (weeks) | Dose          | TNFi-naïve |              |               |                  |      | TNFi-IR |              |               |                   |                   |
|---------------|---------------------------------------|------------|--------------------|---------------|------------|--------------|---------------|------------------|------|---------|--------------|---------------|-------------------|-------------------|
|               |                                       |            |                    |               | N          | Resp. Tx (%) | Resp. PBO (%) | RR (95% CI)      | NNT  | N       | Resp. Tx (%) | Resp. PBO (%) | RR (95% CI)       | NNT               |
| <b>ASAS20</b> |                                       |            |                    |               |            |              |               |                  |      |         |              |               |                   |                   |
| Secukinumab   | MEASURE 3 <sup>36</sup>               | r-axSpA    | 16                 | 300 mg Q4W LD | 173        | 65           | 39            | 1.7 (1.1 to 2.4) | 3.9  | 50      | 47           | 29            | 1.6 (0.7 to 3.9)  | 5.6               |
|               |                                       |            |                    | 150 mg Q4W LD |            | 63           |               | 1.6 (1.1 to 2.4) | 4.1  |         | 41           |               |                   | 1.4 (0.6 to 3.5)  |
|               | MEASURE 4 <sup>27</sup>               | r-axSpA    | 16                 | 150 mg Q4W LD | 253        | 60           | 49            | 1.2 (0.9 to 1.6) | 9.4  | 97      | 58           | 41            | 1.4 (0.9 to 2.3)  | 5.9               |
|               |                                       |            |                    | 150 mg Q4W NL |            | 62           |               | 1.3 (1.0 to 1.7) | 7.7  |         | 59           |               |                   | 1.4 (0.9 to 2.4)  |
|               | MEASURE 5 <sup>28</sup>               | r-axSpA    | 16                 | 150 mg Q4W LD | 362        | 58           | 37            | 1.6 (1.2 to 2.0) | 4.7  | 96      | 58           | 35            | 1.6 (1.0 to 2.8)  | 4.4               |
|               |                                       |            |                    | 150 mg Q4W LD | 501        | -            | -             | -                | -    | 54      | -            | -             | -                 | -                 |
|               | PREVENT <sup>30</sup>                 | nr-axSpA   | 16                 | 150 mg Q4W NL |            | -            | -             | -                | -    |         | -            | -             | -                 | -                 |
| Ixekizumab    | COAST-VW <sup>33,34</sup> (indirect)* | r-axSpA    | 16                 | 80mg Q2W      | 251†       | 69           | 40            | 1.7 (1.3 to 2.3) | 3.5  | 316     | 47           | 30            | 1.6 (1.1 to 2.3)  | 5.8               |
|               |                                       |            |                    | 80 mg Q4W     |            | 64           |               | 1.6 (1.2 to 2.2) | 4.2  |         | 48           |               |                   | 1.6 (1.1 to 2.3)  |
|               | COAST-X <sup>35</sup>                 | nr-axSpA   | 16                 | 80 mg Q2W     | 303        | -            | -             | -                | -    | n/a‡    | -            | -             | n/a‡              | n/a‡              |
|               |                                       |            |                    | 80 mg Q4W     |            | -            | -             | -                | -    |         | -            | -             | -                 |                   |
| <b>ASAS40</b> |                                       |            |                    |               |            |              |               |                  |      |         |              |               |                   |                   |
| Secukinumab   | MEASURE 3 <sup>36</sup>               | r-axSpA    | 16                 | 300 mg Q4W LD | 173        | 44           | 24            | 1.8 (1.1 to 3.2) | 5    | 50      | 37           | 12            | 3.1 (0.8 to 13.1) | 4.0               |
|               |                                       |            |                    | 150mg Q4W LD  |            | 44           |               | 1.8 (1.1 to 3.2) | 5    |         | 29           |               |                   | 2.5 (0.6 to 11.2) |
|               | MEASURE 4 <sup>27</sup>               | r-axSpA    | 16                 | 150mg Q4W LD  | 253        | 40           | 30            | 1.3 (0.9 to 2.0) | 10.1 | 97      | 35           | 24            | 1.5 (0.7 to 3.3)  | 8.4               |
|               |                                       |            |                    | 150 mg Q4W NL |            | 39           |               | 1.3 (0.8 to 2.0) | 11.5 |         | 28           |               |                   | 1.2 (0.5 to 2.7)  |
|               | MEASURE 5 <sup>28</sup>               | r-axSpA    | 16                 | 150 mg Q4W LD | 362        | 43           | 18            | 2.4 (1.6 to 3.5) | 4.1  | 96      | 49           | 13            | 3.8 (1.5 to 9.8)  | 2.8               |
|               |                                       |            |                    | 150 mg Q4W LD | 501        | 41           | 29            | 1.4 (1.1 to 1.9) | 8.2  | 54      | 29           | 13            | 2.1 (0.5 to 9.2)  | 6.6               |
|               | PREVENT <sup>30</sup>                 | nr-axSpA   | 16                 | 150 mg Q4W NL |            | 42           |               | 1.4 (1.1 to 1.9) | 7.7  |         | 28           |               | 2.1 (0.5 to 9.2)  | 6.9               |
| Ixekizumab    | COAST-VW <sup>33,34</sup> (indirect)* | r-axSpA    | 16                 | 80 mg Q2W     | 251        | 52           | 18            | 2.8 (1.7 to 4.6) | 3    | 316     | 31           | 13            | 2.4 (1.4 to 4.4)  | 5.5               |
|               |                                       |            |                    | 80 mg Q4W     |            | 48           |               | 2.6 (1.6 to 4.3) | 3.4  |         | 25           |               |                   | 2.0 (1.1 to 3.7)  |
|               | COAST-X <sup>35</sup>                 | nr-axSpA   | 16                 | 80 mg Q2W     | 303        | 40           | 19            | 2.1 (1.3 to 3.3) | 4.7  | n/a‡    | -            | -             | n/a‡              | n/a‡              |
|               |                                       |            |                    | 80mg Q4W      |            | 35           |               | 1.9 (1.2 to 3.0) | 6.1  |         | -            | -             | -                 |                   |

Some studies did not report on the outcomes presented above (indicated with a '-').

\* Indirect comparison: COAST-V included TNFi-naïve patients with r-axSpA, while COAST-W included TNFi-IR patients with r-axSpA.

† COAST-V also included a treatment arm with adalimumab treatment (n=90, not included in sample size reported in table above), which served as in-study active reference for comparison with placebo to provide additional context to interpretation of the ixekizumab study results.

‡ COAST-X only included TNFi-naïve patients.

ASAS, Assessment of SpondyloArthritis International Society; axSpA, axial spondyloarthritis; IL-17i, interleukin-17 inhibitors; LD, loading dose; n/a, not applicable; NL, no loading dose; NNT, number needed to treat; nr-axSpA, non-radiographic axSpA; PBO, placebo; Q4W, every 4 weeks; r-axSpA, radiographic axSpA; Resp, response; RR, risk ratio; TNFi, tumour necrosis factor inhibitor; TNFi-IR, inadequate response to TNFi; Tx, treatment.

**Table 4** Effect of bDMARD discontinuation on risk of flare in patient with axSpA

| Outcome      |                          |            |     |                    |                 |   |                                      |            |              |
|--------------|--------------------------|------------|-----|--------------------|-----------------|---|--------------------------------------|------------|--------------|
| Drug         | Study                    | Population | N   | Time point (weeks) | Flare* stop (%) | Flare* continuation (%)                                       | RR (95% CI)                          | NNT        | Risk of bias |
| TNFi         |                          |            |     |                    |                 |   |                                      |            |              |
| Certolizumab | C-OPTIMISE <sup>44</sup> | axSpA      | 313 | 48                 | 80              | 16 (full dose) <sup>†</sup><br>21 (reduced dose) <sup>†</sup> | 4.9 (3.1 to 7.6)<br>3.8 (2.6 to 5.6) | 1.6<br>1.7 | Low          |
| Adalimumab   | ABILITY-3 <sup>43</sup>  | nr-axSpA   | 305 | 40                 | 53              | 30  | 1.8 (1.3 to 2.4)                     | 4.3        | Low          |
| Etanercept   | RE-EMBARK <sup>45</sup>  | nr-axSpA   | -‡  | 40                 | 75              | <25   | §                                    | §          | Unknown      |
| IL-17i       |                          |            |     |                    |                 |   |                                      |            |              |
| Ixekizumab   | COAST-Y <sup>50</sup>    | axSpA      | 155 | 40                 | 45              | 17  | 2.7 (1.6 to 4.6)                     | 3.5        | Low          |

\*Definitions of flare: ASDAS $\geq$ 2.1 at two consecutive visits or ASDAS $>$ 3.5 at any visit (C-OPTIMISE, COAST-Y); ASDAS $\geq$ 2.1 at two consecutive visits (ABILITY-3); ASDAS-ESR $\geq$ 2.1 (RE-EMBARK).  
<sup>†</sup>After a 48-week open-label induction period with certolizumab 200 mg Q2W, patients were randomised to certolizumab 200 mg Q2W (full dose), 200 mg Q4W (reduced dose) or placebo.  
<sup>‡</sup>Number of patients not reported.  
<sup>§</sup>RRR and NNT could not be estimated (flare rate in continuation group not reported).  
axSpA, axial spondyloarthritis; bDMARD, biological disease-modifying antirheumatic drug; IL-17i, interleukin-17 inhibitors; NNT, number needed to treat; nr-axSpA, non-radiographic axSpA; Q2W, every 2 weeks; RR, risk ratio; TNFi, tumour necrosis factor inhibitor.

One phase IV study (NOR-DRUM) with low RoB investigated therapeutic drug monitoring (TDM) in six diseases, including axSpA (online supplemental tables S4.36–S4.45).<sup>48 49</sup> Infliximab with TDM was not superior compared to infliximab without TDM in the first 30 weeks after drug initiation.<sup>48</sup> In patients on stable treatment, however, addition of TDM was efficacious for maintaining disease control over 52 weeks (79.4% with TDM vs 58.6% without TDM (NNT 4.8)).<sup>49</sup>

Only one trial evaluated the discontinuation of IL-17i.<sup>50</sup> Similar to observations with TNFi, the risk of flare following discontinuation of ixekizumab was significantly higher compared to continuation after 40 weeks (46.3% vs 16.7%) (table 4).<sup>50</sup> No studies on tapering of IL-17i were available.

#### Effect on extra-musculoskeletal manifestations

The frequency of AAU, IBD and psoriasis in RCTs (and OLE/LTE) of patients treated with TNFi and IL-17i was overall low and comparable to those of the placebo arm (online supplemental tables S5.1–S5.9, S5.22–S5.30).<sup>17 19 24 26–28 30 32–35 38 51–62</sup> One observational study at low RoB conducted in a large Swedish registry (Swedish Rheumatology Quality Register, SRQ) found an increased risk of first on-treatment AAU with etanercept use compared to adalimumab (HR 3.89 (1.85–8.06)) and infliximab (HR 1.99 (1.23–3.22)) use in those without recent AAU.<sup>63</sup> These findings were confirmed in another observational study within the same registry.<sup>64</sup> Other observational studies of TNFi and AAU did not highlight any differences between TNFi or were at high RoB (online supplemental tables S5.10–S5.21). The risk of a first AAU was higher with secukinumab compared to adalimumab in one study, conducted in the same Swedish registry mentioned above (HR 2.32 (1.16–4.63), low RoB).<sup>64</sup> In this study, the incidence of any AAU episode, first or recurrent, with secukinumab was also higher than with adalimumab or infliximab. Observational studies of TNFi and IBD/psoriasis were all at unknown or high RoB with conflicting results (online supplemental tables S5.31–S5.34).<sup>65–68</sup> No observational studies were available on the risk of IBD or psoriasis in IL-17i users.

#### Safety of bDMARDs

The frequency of serious infections, malignancies and cardiovascular events in RCTs of patients treated with TNFi and IL-17i was low (online supplemental tables S6.1–S6.6).<sup>27 28 38 52–62 69–72</sup> Observational studies evaluating the safety of TNFi and IL-17i

are reported in table 5. The risk of infections was similar across different TNFi, in two observational studies at high RoB (online supplemental tables S6.7–S6.10).<sup>73 74</sup> For malignancies, the risk in TNFi users was not increased compared to non-users in two large Scandinavian registries (incidence rate ratio (IRR) for any malignancy 0.8 (0.6–1.1)) and in one US cohort.<sup>75 76</sup> Incidence of neuroinflammatory events was higher in TNFi-experienced patients compared to naïve patients (incidence rate 78–88/100 000 person-years (PY) vs 13–50/100 000 PY).<sup>77</sup> Incidence of multiple sclerosis in TNFi (ever) users compared to the general population was increased (IRR 3.9 (1.5–10.4)), although it was unclear whether this was a drug or disease effect.<sup>78</sup> No observational studies on safety of IL-17i were available.

#### Summary of evidence

A summary of the level of evidence for all bDMARDs in axSpA is presented in figure 1. This summary is based on evidence included in the current SLR as well as the previous SLR from 2016.<sup>9</sup> In addition, a positive RCT of bimekizumab in nr-axSpA that was presented at EULAR 2022 (after conduct of the current SLR), was considered as well.<sup>79</sup>

#### DISCUSSION

The current SLR confirms the efficacy and safety of TNFi (originators and biosimilars) and IL-17i (in particular secukinumab and ixekizumab) in patients with axSpA. Several new IL-17i also showed promising effects in phase II and III trials. Discontinuation of TNFi or IL-17i was unsuccessful as it led to substantially more flares than continuing treatment. Tapering, however, and especially spacing, showed promising results in patients with sustained remission or low disease activity. IL-12/23i failed to show efficacy in multiple large trials in (r-)axSpA. The first T2T trial in axSpA did not meet its primary endpoint, but did show improvements in secondary outcomes. Finally, monoclonal TNFi were associated with reduced risk of uveitis compared to TNF receptor protein (etanercept) and IL-17i (secukinumab).

Several large, high-quality, trials have demonstrated the efficacy of secukinumab and ixekizumab in axSpA, including nr-axSpA and r-axSpA. For both drugs, efficacy was also assessed in patients who were TNFi-naïve or TNFi-IR. Of note, whereas the MEASURE programme included both types of patients in the same trials and stratified randomisation for prior TNFi exposure (allowing for a direct comparison between subgroups but

**Table 5** Safety of bDMARDs in observational studies with a comparator group in patients with axSpA

| Outcome                             | Definition of outcome                 | Treatment/comparator group | N Patients | Exposure (PYs) | N Events  | IR, per 100 PY | Effect size Ratio (95% CI) | Risk of bias |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|------------|----------------|-----------|----------------|----------------------------|--------------|
| Serious infection                   |                                       |                            |            |                |           |                |                            |              |
| Park <i>et al</i> <sup>93</sup>     | Serious infection                     | Low-dose etanercept        | 100        | 441            | –         | 0.5            | IRR 0.44 (0.04 to 4.80)    | Unclear      |
|                                     |                                       | Standard-dose etanercept   | 34         | 96             | –         | 1              | REF                        |              |
| Moura <i>et al</i> <sup>94</sup>    | Hospitalised infection                | TNFi (±csDMARD) use        | 747        | 948            | 20        | 2.1            | HR 1.00 (0.47 to 2.11)*    | Unclear      |
|                                     |                                       | TNFi non-use               | (overall)  | 380            | 10        | 2.6            | REF                        |              |
| Krabbe <i>et al</i> <sup>95</sup>   | Serious infection                     | First bDMARD†              | 2958       | –              | 81        | 2.7            | HR 2.8 (2.2 to 3.6)        | Unclear      |
|                                     |                                       | General population         | 29 579     | –              | 292       | 1              | REF                        |              |
| Malignancies                        |                                       |                            |            |                |           |                |                            |              |
| Hellgren <i>et al</i> <sup>75</sup> | First cancer diagnosis                | TNFi initiated             | 3078       | 12 104         | 53        | –              | IRR 0.8 (0.6 to 1.1)‡      | Unclear      |
|                                     |                                       | TNFi-naïve                 | 7023       | 45 903         | 310       | –              | REF                        |              |
| Park <i>et al</i> <sup>93</sup>     | Malignancy                            | Low-dose etanercept        | 100        | 441            | –         | 0.5            | HR 0.44 (0.04 to 4.80)‡    | Unclear      |
|                                     |                                       | Standard-dose etanercept   | 34         | 96             | –         | 1              | REF                        |              |
| Merjanah <i>et al</i> <sup>76</sup> | Malignant neoplasm                    | TNFi exposed               | 5370       | –              | 530       | –              | OR – (p=0.20)              | Unknown      |
|                                     |                                       | TNFi-naïve                 | 7280       | –              | 770       | –              | REF                        |              |
|                                     | Skin cancer§                          | TNFi exposed               | 5370       | –              | –         | –              | OR 0.9 (0.73 to 1.10)      |              |
|                                     |                                       | TNFi-naïve                 | 7280       | –              | –         | –              | REF                        |              |
| Cardiovascular                      |                                       |                            |            |                |           |                |                            |              |
| Liew <i>et al</i> <sup>96</sup>     | Incident hypertension                 | TNFi use                   | 269        | –              | 129       | –              | HR 1.10 (0.83 to 1.37)¶    | Unclear      |
|                                     |                                       | TNFi non-use               | 361        | –              | (overall) | –              | REF                        |              |
| Neuroinflammatory                   |                                       |                            |            |                |           |                |                            |              |
| Dreyer <i>et al</i> <sup>78</sup>   | Multiple sclerosis                    | TNFi use, ever             | 1728       | –              | 4         | –              | IRR 3.91 (1.47 to 10.42)** | Unclear      |
|                                     |                                       | General population         | –          | –              | 0         | –              | REF                        |              |
| Kopp <i>et al</i> <sup>77</sup>     | Neuroinflammatory events†† (cohort 1) | TNFi exposed               | –          | 44 840         | 35        | 0.78/1000 PY   | –‡‡                        | Unclear      |
|                                     |                                       | TNFi non-exposed           | –          | 170 357        | 86        | 0.50/1000 PY   | REF                        |              |
|                                     | Neuroinflammatory events†† (cohort 2) | TNFi exposed               | –          | 14 697         | 13        | 0.88/1000 PY   | –‡‡                        |              |
|                                     |                                       | TNFi non-exposed           | –          | 7475           | 1         | 0.13/1000 PY   | REF                        |              |

Only studies with a low/unclear/unknown RoB are presented.

\*Adjusted for age, sex, socioeconomic status, number of outpatient visits/procedures 1 year before cohort entry, hospitalised infection 1 year before cohort entry, Charlson Comorbidity Index, IBD, ever use of NSAID/COXIB 1 year before cohort entry, glucocorticoid use).

†99.7% TNFi, 0.3% other bDMARD.

‡Age and sex standardised.

§Squamous cell carcinoma, malignant melanoma, basal cell carcinoma.

¶Adjusted for age, sex, race, study site, BMI, disease activity, NSAID use.

\*\*Standardised for age, sex and calendar time period

††Demyelinating diseases of the central nervous system, multiple sclerosis, inflammatory polyneuropathies.

‡‡HR only reported for r-axSpA and psoriatic arthritis populations pooled (adjusted HR 1.50 (1.07–2.11) (cohort 1) and 3.41 (1.30–8.96) (cohort 2)).

axSpA, axial spondyloarthritis; bDMARD, biological disease-modifying antirheumatic drug; BMI, body mass index; csDMARD, conventional-synthetic DMARD; IBD, inflammatory bowel disease; IL-17i, interleukin-17 inhibitor; IR, incidence rate; IRR, incidence rate ratio; NSAID, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug; PY, patient-years; REF, reference group; TNFi, tumour necrosis factor inhibitor.

with a lower number of patients), the COAST trial programme conducted separate trials, one with TNFi-naïve patients and the other TNFi-IR patients (not allowing for a direct comparison, but with a large number of (TNFi-IR) patients). The confirmation that both drugs are efficacious in TNFi-naïve and TNFi-IR patients is clinically relevant, as it helps guide the position of these drugs in the management strategy for axSpA. In addition to secukinumab and ixekizumab, newer IL-17i also proved to be effective. For bimekizumab, only data from a phase II trial in r-axSpA were available at the time of our literature search. Since then, positive phase III trial results have been presented at EULAR 2022 in both r-axSpA and nr-axSpA.<sup>79 80</sup> Patients who fail TNFi have now valuable alternatives, which should bring new hope to those living with axSpA. Future trials should address the efficacy of TNFi in patients who failed a previous TNFi and in patients who failed an IL-17i.




On a related note, with the exception of the tapering and discontinuation trials, all efficacy trials in the current SLR were placebo-controlled. Although the results of the various drugs

and drug classes seem somewhat comparable (NNT of TNFi and IL-17i mostly in the 3–6 range for ASAS40 response), differences between trials with regard to design, study populations and quality/RoB hamper indirect comparisons. The lack of formal head-to-head RCTs, which was already highlighted in the previous SLR from 2016, remains an ongoing unmet need.<sup>9</sup> Yet, one of the trials on ixekizumab did include (a small number of patients on) adalimumab as an ‘in-study’ active reference for comparison with placebo, to provide additional context to the interpretation of the study results.<sup>33</sup> Although no formal comparison between ixekizumab and adalimumab was made, perhaps this trial could encourage the undertaking of true head-to-head non-inferiority trials in axSpA in the near future.

In the case of ustekinumab, despite promising results in a proof-of-concept study, all four subsequent trials with IL-(12)/23i failed to show any clinically relevant effect leading to a premature termination of the ustekinumab trial programme.<sup>40 41</sup> This clear contrast with the trials in psoriatic arthritis and psoriasis, where IL-23i have shown substantial benefits, has sparked



| Class       | Intervention | r-axSpA | nr-axSpA |
|-------------|--------------|---------|----------|
| TNFi        | Adalimumab   | 1a      | 1b       |
|             | Certolizumab | 1b      | 1b       |
|             | Etanercept   | 1a      | 1b       |
|             | Golimumab    | 1a      | 1b       |
|             | Infliximab   | 1a      | NA       |
| IL-17i      | Secukinumab  | 1b      | 1b       |
|             | Ixekizumab   | 1b      | 1b       |
|             | Bimekizumab  | 1b      | *        |
|             | Brodalumab   | 1b†     | 1b†      |
|             | Netakimab    | 1b      | NA       |
| IL-(12)/23i | Ustekinumab  | 1b      | 1b       |
|             | Risankizumab | 1b      | NA       |
| IL-6i       | Tocilizumab  | 1b      | NA       |
|             | Sarilumab    | 1b      | NA       |
| Other       | Abatacept    | 4       | NA       |
|             | Rituximab    | 4       | NA       |

 Supportive
  Unsupportive
  No data

**Figure 1** Level of evidence and support for bDMARDs, by axSpA subtype. Colours provide information on whether the available evidence, as included in the current SLR and a previous SLR,<sup>9</sup> supports or does not support the use of each bDMARD in axSpA. The levels of evidence are based on the EULAR standardised operating procedures and the Oxford Centre for Evidence-based Medicine Levels of Evidence. \*Judged as 'Supportive' based on a positive RCT presented at EULAR 2022,<sup>79</sup> after conduct of the current SLR. †Formally only tested in axSpA overall, not by subtype. axSpA, axial spondyloarthritis; bDMARDs, biological disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs; IL, interleukin; NA, not available; nr-axSpA, non-radiographic axSpA; RCT, randomised controlled trial; r-axSpA, radiographic axSpA; SLR, systematic literature review; TNFi, tumour necrosis factor inhibitor.

discussion on the precise role of IL-23 in the pathophysiology of axSpA.<sup>81 82</sup>

In new studies on biosimilars, efficacy and safety were comparable to originators in patients with active disease or when switching from originator to biosimilar in those with stable disease.<sup>22-25</sup> Together with previous evidence,<sup>83</sup> it is clear now that originators and biosimilars can be considered equivalent in terms of efficacy and safety in axSpA.

Another important update in the existing evidence base, has been the Tight Control in Spondyloarthritis (TICOSPA) study; the first trial investigating a T2T approach in axSpA. TICOSPA failed to meet its primary endpoint. Yet, the choice of outcome measure (ASAS HI improvement, instead of a direct 'disease activity-related' outcome) and the high level of expertise of the participating centres (usual care response was higher than expected)<sup>42</sup> may well explain the failure to meet the primary endpoint, rather than this being an indication that T2T is not a viable approach in axSpA. In this line, noting that most secondary efficacy outcomes were met, including ASAS20/40 responses, becomes relevant. Additional trials are needed to

clarify whether T2T has benefits in axSpA, and which strategies and targets should be used to maximise patients' health.

Two new trials on tapering of TNFi, both with good results,<sup>46 47</sup> represent another valuable contribution to the literature. Taken together with two trials that were included in the previous SLR from 2016,<sup>84 85</sup> there are now three separate studies in axSpA that demonstrate spacing to be non-inferior to standard TNFi regimens,<sup>46 47 85</sup> and one study that found dose reduction to be inferior.<sup>84</sup> Altogether, these observations suggest that tapering of bDMARDs is feasible in axSpA and that spacing is the preferred option. Identifying the 'right' patients for spacing remains to be determined.

TDM was of added benefit in maintaining disease control in those already on stable infliximab (NOR-DRUM B), but not in those starting infliximab (NOR-DRUM A).<sup>48 49</sup> Recently published EULAR Points to Consider (PtC) on drug monitoring do not recommend proactive TDM in the management of inflammatory RMDs (of note, the positive results of NOR-DRUM B were unavailable when these PtC were formulated).<sup>86</sup> Additional studies are necessary to determine the role of (proactive) TDM in the management of axSpA.

As part of this SLR, we evaluated the effect of bDMARDs on EMMs, which was a change compared to the previous SLR. This change was prompted by clinical questions related to the preferred choice of bDMARDs in patients with EMMs. Most evidence in this area focuses on AAU. In two large studies within the same registry, etanercept (two studies) and secukinumab (one study) were associated with increased risk of AAU compared to adalimumab.<sup>63 64</sup> Although the RoB of both studies was judged as low and several sensitivity analyses were conducted, the risk of residual confounding and channelling bias cannot be entirely ruled out. Nonetheless, these findings suggest that in case of a history of AAU, monoclonal TNFi might be preferred. Observations from the C-VIEW and GO-EASY studies (not included in the current SLR due to the lack of a concurrent comparator) confirmed the effect of monoclonal TNFi on AAU.<sup>87 88</sup> For other EMMs, the evidence is still limited to data from RCTs and their LTEs. In RCTs of IL-17i, rates of IBD were low and in line with previous findings, although it should be noted that they pertain to selected populations, thus these findings need confirmation in long-term observational studies. Of note, results from RCTs in non-axSpA populations with IBD support preference for monoclonal TNFi (over etanercept and IL-17i) for patients with IBD, similar to uveitis.<sup>89-92</sup>

The evidence from observational studies evaluating the safety of bDMARDs in axSpA remains limited. Although the new evidence supports the findings of the previous SLR that TNFi are safe in axSpA, definitive conclusions are still challenging to make, primarily due to the majority of studies being at high risk of bias. In addition, there was a striking lack of studies evaluating the safety of IL-17i. Going forward, observational studies with good methodological quality are needed to confirm the long-term safety of bDMARDs in axSpA.

Bringing the evidence together, this SLR confirms the efficacy and safety of IL-17i in patients with both r-axSpA and nr-axSpA, while IL-23i and IL-12/23i have failed to show relevant benefits in axSpA. TNFi biosimilar-originator equivalence has been confirmed, and spacing seems the preferred method to taper TNFi. Finally, the risk of anterior uveitis seems lowest with monoclonal TNFi compared to other bDMARDs in axSpA. This SLR provides important new insights into the management of patients with bDMARDs, across the entire spectrum of axSpA.

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