Association of the COVID-19 Outbreak with Acute Stroke Care in Switzerland

Gian Marco De Marchis, MD, MSc[1,2*], Patrick R. Wright, PhD[2*], Patrik Michel, MD[3], Davide Strambo, MD[3], Emmanuel Carrera, MD[4], Elisabeth Dirren, MD[4], Andreas R Luft, MD[5,6], Susanne Wegener, MD[5], Carlo W Cereda, MD[7], Georg Kägi, MD[8, 22], Jochen Vehoff, MD[8], Henrik Gensicke, MD[1], Philippe Lyrer, MD[1, 2], Krassen Nedeltchev, MD[9], Timo Khales, MD[9], Manuel Bolognese, MD[10], Stephan Salmen, MD[11], Rolf Sturzenegger, MD[12], Christophe Bonvin, MD, MSc[13], Christian Berger, MD[14], Ludwig Schelosky, MD[15], Marie-Luise Mono, MD[16], Biljana Rodic, MD[17], Andrea von Reding[17], Guido Schwegler, MD[18], Alexander A. Tarnutzer, MD[19], Friedrich Medlin, MD[20], Andrea M. Humm, MD[20], Nils Peters, MD[21], Morin Beyeler, MD[22], Lilian Kriemler, MD[1], David Bervini, MD[23], Javier Fandino, MD[24], Lars G. Hemkens, MD, MPH[2,25,26], Pasquale Mordasini, MD[27], Marcel Arnold, MD[22], Urs Fischer, MD, MSc[1,2,22**], Leo H. Bonati, MD[1,2**], on behalf of the Swiss Stroke Registry Investigators†

[1] Department of Neurology and Stroke Center, University Hospital Basel, Switzerland
[2] Department of Clinical Research University of Basel, Switzerland
[3] Department of Neurology, Lausanne University Hospital – Centre Hospitalier Universitaire Vaudois (CHUV)
[4] Department of Neurology, University Hospital Geneva, Switzerland
[5] Department of Neurology, University Hospital Zurich and University of Zurich, Switzerland
[6] Cereneo Center for Neurology and Rehabilitation, Vitznau, Switzerland
[7] Department of Neurology and Stroke Center, Neurocenter of Southern Switzerland, Lugano, Switzerland
[8] Department of Neurology, Cantonal Hospital St. Gallen, Switzerland
[9] Department of Neurology, Cantonal Hospital Aarau, Switzerland
[10] Stroke Center, Kantonspital Lucerne, Switzerland
[11] Stroke Unit, Spitalzentrum Biel, Switzerland
[12] Stroke Unit, Cantonal Hospital Graubünden, Chur, Switzerland
[13] Department of Neurology, Hôpital du Valais, Sion, Switzerland
[14] Stroke Unit, Cantonal Hospital Grabs, Switzerland
[15] Stroke Unit, Cantonal Hospital Münsterlingen, Switzerland
[16] Stroke Unit, Stadtspital Waid and Triemli, Zurich, Switzerland
[17] Stroke Unit, Cantonal Hospital Winterthur, Switzerland
[18] Stroke Unit, Spital Limmattal, Schlieren, Switzerland
[19] Stroke Unit, Cantonal Hospital Baden, Switzerland
[20] Stroke Unit, HFR Fribourg – Hôpital Cantonal, Switzerland
[21] Department of Neurology and Stroke Center, Hirslanden Clinic Zurich, Switzerland
[22] Department of Neurology and Stroke Center, University Hospital Berne – Inselspital, Switzerland

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[23] Department of Neurosurgery, University Hospital Berne, Switzerland
[24] Department of Neurosurgery, Hirslanden Clinic Aarau & Zurich, Switzerland
[25] Meta-Research Innovation Center at Stanford (METRICS), Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA
[26] Meta-Research Innovation Center Berlin (METRIC-B), Berlin Institute of Health, Berlin, Germany
[27] Department of Neuroradiology, University Hospital Berne, Switzerland

* These authors contributed equally to this work as co-first authors.
** These authors contributed equally to this work as co-senior authors.
† Investigators of the Swiss Stroke Registry are listed in the Appendix.

Corresponding Author:
Prof. Dr. med. Leo H. Bonati & Prof. Dr. med. Urs Fischer, MSc
Department of Neurology and Stroke Center
Department of Clinical Research
University Hospital Basel
Petersgraben 4
CH-4031 Basel, Switzerland
E-mail: leo.bonati@usb.ch
E-mail: urs.fischer@usb.ch
Tel.: +41 61 2652525
FAX: +41 61 2654100

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DR. GIAN MARCO DE MARCHIS (Orcid ID : 0000-0002-0342-9780)
DR. SUSANNE WEGENER (Orcid ID : 0000-0003-4369-7023)
PROF. FRIEDRICH MEDLIN (Orcid ID : 0000-0002-8477-899X)

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Association of the COVID-19 Outbreak with Acute Stroke Care in Switzerland

Lower admission rates for acute cerebrovascular events

Gian Marco De Marchis, MD, MSc[1,2*], Patrick R. Wright, PhD[2*], Patrik Michel, MD[3], Davide Strambo, MD[3], Emmanuel Carrera, MD[4], Elisabeth Dirren, MD[4], Andreas R Luft, MD[5,6], Susanne Wegener, MD[5], Carlo W Cereda, MD[7], Georg Kägi, MD[8, 22], Jochen Vehoff, MD[8], Henrik Gensicke, MD[1], Philippe Lyrer, MD[1, 2], Krassen Nedeltchev, MD[9], Timo Khales, MD[9], Manuel Bolognese, MD[10], Stephan Salmen, MD[11], Rolf Sturzenegger, MD[12], Christophe Bonvin, MD, MSc[13], Christian Berger, MD[14], Ludwig Schelosky, MD[15], Marie-Luise Mono, MD[16], Biljana Rodic, MD[17], Andrea von Reding[17], Guido Schwegler, MD[18], Alexander A. Tarnutzer, MD[19], Friedrich Medlin, MD[20], Andrea M. Humm, MD[20], Nils Peters, MD[21], Morin Beyeler, MD[22], Lilian Kriemler, MD[1], David Bervini, MD[23], Javier Fandino, MD[24], Lars G. Hemkens, MD, MPH[2,25,26], Pasquale Mordasini, MD[27], Marcel Arnold, MD[22], Urs Fischer, MD, MSc[1,2,22**], Leo H. Bonati, MD[1,2**], on behalf of the Swiss Stroke Registry Investigators†

[1] Department of Neurology and Stroke Center, University Hospital Basel, Switzerland
[2] Department of Clinical Research University of Basel, Switzerland
[3] Department of Neurology, Lausanne University Hospital – Centre Hospitalier Universitaire Vaudois (CHUV)
[4] Department of Neurology, University Hospital Geneva, Switzerland
[5] Department of Neurology, University Hospital Zurich and University of Zurich, Switzerland
[6] Cereneo Center for Neurology and Rehabilitation, Vitznau, Switzerland
[7] Department of Neurology and Stroke Center, Neurocenter of Southern Switzerland, Lugano, Switzerland
[8] Department of Neurology, Cantonal Hospital St. Gallen, Switzerland
[9] Department of Neurology, Cantonal Hospital Aarau, Switzerland
[10] Stroke Center, Kantonspital Lucerne, Switzerland

[11] Stroke Unit, Spitalzentrum Biel, Switzerland
[12] Stroke Unit, Cantonal Hospital Graubünden, Chur, Switzerland
[13] Department of Neurology, Hôpital du Valais, Sion, Switzerland
[14] Stroke Unit, Cantonal Hospital Grabs, Switzerland
[15] Stroke Unit, Cantonal Hospital Münsterlingen, Switzerland
[16] Stroke Unit, Stadtspital Waid and Triemli, Zurich, Switzerland
[17] Stroke Unit, Cantonal Hospital Winterthur, Switzerland
[18] Stroke Unit, Spital Limmattal, Schlieren, Switzerland
[19] Stroke Unit, Cantonal Hospital Baden, Switzerland
[20] Stroke Unit, HFR Fribourg – Hôpital Cantonal, Switzerland
[21] Department of Neurology and Stroke Center, Hirslanden Clinic Zurich, Switzerland
[22] Department of Neurology and Stroke Center, University Hospital Berne – Inselspital, Switzerland
[23] Department of Neurosurgery, University Hospital Berne, Switzerland
[24] Department of Neurosurgery, Hirslanden Clinic Aarau & Zurich, Switzerland
[25] Meta-Research Innovation Center at Stanford (METRICS), Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA
[26] Meta-Research Innovation Center Berlin (METRIC-B), Berlin Institute of Health, Berlin, Germany
[27] Department of Neuroradiology, University Hospital Berne, Switzerland

* These authors contributed equally to this work as co-first authors.
** These authors contributed equally to this work as co-senior authors.
† Investigators of the Swiss Stroke Registry are listed in the Appendix.

Corresponding Author:
Prof. Dr. med. Leo H. Bonati & Prof. Dr. med. Urs Fischer, MSc
Department of Neurology and Stroke Center
Department of Clinical Research
University Hospital Basel
Petersgraben 4
CH-4031 Basel, Switzerland
E-mail: leo.bonati@usb.ch
E-mail: urs.fischer@usb.ch
Tel.: +41 61 2652525
FAX: +41 61 2654100

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Abstract

Background: In Switzerland, the COVID-19 incidence during the first pandemic wave was high. We aimed to assess the association of the outbreak with acute stroke care in Switzerland in spring 2020.

Methods: Retrospective analysis based on the Swiss Stroke Registry, which includes consecutive patients with acute cerebrovascular events admitted to Swiss Stroke Units and Centers. We fitted a linear model to the weekly admission from 2018 and 2019 and used it to quantify deviations from the expected weekly admissions during from March, 13 to April 26, 2020 (the "lockdown period"). We compared characteristics and 3-month outcome of patients admitted during the lockdown period versus patients admitted during the same calendar period of 2018–2019.

Results: We included 28'310 patients admitted between 1 January 2018 and 26 April 2020. Of these, 4'491 (15.9%) were admitted in the epochs March 13–April 26 of the years 2018 to 2020. During the lockdown in 2020, the weekly admissions dropped by up to 22% compared to rates expected from 2018 and 2019. During three consecutive weeks, weekly admissions fell below the 5% quantile (likelihood 0.38%). The proportion of intracerebral hemorrhage (ICH) among all registered admissions increased from 7.1% to 9.3% (P=0.006), and numerically less severe strokes were observed (median NIHSS from 3 to 2, P=0.07).

Conclusions: Admissions and clinical severity of acute cerebrovascular events decreased substantially during the lockdown in Switzerland. Delivery and quality of acute stroke care were maintained.

Abbreviations and Acronyms:

COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
EVT	Endovascular Treatment
ICH	Intracranial haemorrhage
mRS	Modified Rankin Scale
NIHSS	National Institutes of Health Stroke Scale
SARS-CoV-2	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2
SSR	Swiss Stroke Registry

Introduction

In Switzerland, the incidence of Sars-CoV2 infections during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic wave was high (342/100'000).[1] To curb the pandemic, the Swiss Federal Council declared a national lockdown from 13th of March 2020 to 26th of April 2020, with a major impact on all domains of daily life. Schools and non-essential shops were closed nationwide, and all gatherings of more than five people in public spaces were banned. Unlike in many other countries, no strict confinement was imposed. These unprecedented circumstances raised concern about potential restrictions in medical care of acute cardiovascular diseases. Many stroke physicians perceived a decrease in the number of admitted patients with ischemic stroke and intracerebral haemorrhage (ICH), similar to what has been reported in other countries. [2-10] We aimed to investigate changes in weekly admissions, clinical patient characteristics, delivery of acute therapy, and functional 3-month outcome among patients with acute cerebrovascular events during the lockdown period compared to rates from 2018 and 2019 based on the prospective Swiss Stroke Registry.

Methods

This is a retrospective analysis of prospectively collected data from the Swiss Stroke Registry, an institutional review board-approved national web-based registry designed for quality assurance and multi-centric research in acute stroke care in Switzerland. Registry details have been detailed previously.[11] Briefly, the registry collects a standardized dataset of all patients with acute cerebrovascular events including a follow-up assessment after 3 months and is compulsory for all hospitals certified as Stroke Units or Stroke Centers, in line with European Stroke Organisation criteria.[12] The registry includes 10 Stroke Centers and 12 Stroke Units, which – in contrast to Stroke Centers – do not perform acute endovascular treatments. The registry was implemented in the clinical data management system secuTrial and data processing is aided by the software package secuTrial.[13] The de-identified data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

For this analysis, we included consecutive patients with an acute ischaemic stroke, intracerebral hemorrhage (ICH) or transient ischemic attack (TIA) admitted to a certified Stroke Center or Stroke Unit between 1st of January 2018 and 8th of June 2020 to investigate for any deviation in the observed from the expected admission rates during the first lockdown period, which was defined from 13th of March 2020 to 26th of April 2020. In addition, we

compared patient characteristics, acute therapy, and functional outcome of patients admitted during the lockdown period to those admitted in the same period in the years 2018 and 2019. We compared the weekly admissions for acute ischemic stroke, transient ischemic attack (TIA) and intracerebral hemorrhage between both periods. We also compared time from symptom onset or last seen well to hospital admission; patient referral (e.g. ambulance or self-referral); severity of symptoms on admission (measured by the NIH Stroke Scale [NIHSS]); rate of acute stroke treatments delivered (including intravenous thrombolysis [IVT] and endovascular therapy [EVT]); in-hospital performance measures defined as time from hospital admission to start of IVT ("door-to-needle time") or EVT ("door-to-groin-puncture time"); rate of patients with wake-up stroke treated by IVT or EVT (defined as a stroke with symptoms that were present when the patient awoke but not prior to falling asleep); stroke etiology defined by TOAST criteria[14] (cardiac embolism, small vessel disease, large artery atherosclerosis, other defined cause, multiple causes, no identified cause); in-hospital outcome including symptomatic intracerebral haemorrhage, all-cause mortality; level of disability at 3 months (measured by the modified Rankin Scale[15] [mRS]); and all-cause mortality at 3 months. At 3 months, information on functional outcomes and mortality was available in 80% of patients.

Geographical comparison: Across geographic regions within Switzerland, the COVID19 incidence rates differed during the first pandemic wave. We defined "high-incidence" regions as having more than 700 COVID19 cases/100'000 people by 27th April 2020 according to the statistics of the Federal Office of Public Health; high incidence cantons were Ticino, Geneva, Vaud, Vallis. We compared weekly admissions for "high-incidence regions" to the rest of the country.[16]

Statistical analysis

As over the years 2015-2019 the number of weekly stroke admissions had been increasing following a linear trend, we assumed that this trend would have continued in 2020 if the COVID-19 pandemic had not occurred. Hence, we fitted a linear model to the data from the years prior to 2020 and used this model to quantify deviations from the expectation. Fitting this linear model simply to the total number of across-center hospital admissions would, however, be problematic. Not all centers contributed their numbers to the study data set from 2015 onward, but instead started contributing in later years. Each addition of a center leads to a jump in the total number of admissions in the year of its addition. To make sure that these

jumps do not influence the estimate of our linear model of the steady increase of admissions over time, we repeated our analysis using three subsets of the study data: one containing all centers contributing since 2015 with years 2015-2020, one with all centers contributing since 2016 with years 2016-2020, and one with all centers contributing since 2018 with years 2018-2020 (which are all centers). Since the analysis described above revealed a clear decline of stroke admissions in the 2020 Swiss lockdown period, we posed the question if the population of admitted cases had in some way changed. Due to known, pandemic independent, temporal trends in certain variables we consider a comparison of e.g., 2020 to 2015 inappropriate. We decided to compare the patient population of weeks 11-17 in 2020 to the patient population of weeks 11-17 in 2018 and 2019. The analysis period spanned from January 1st, 2018 to the 8th of June, 2020.

Categorical variables were summarized as counts and percentages, continuous ones as median and interquartile ranges. Categorical variables were compared with the Fisher's exact test, continuous variables with the Wilcoxon rank-sum test. P-values are two-tailed. P-values < 0.05 were considered statistically significant. Statistical analysis was performed by P.W. and G.D. using R version 3.6.3 (*R Core Team. 2019: R: A Language and Environment for Statistical Computing. R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria*).

Results

Overall, 28'310 patients were admitted between 1st of January, 2018 and 8th of June, 2020. Of these, 4'491 (15.9%) were admitted during the lockdown period 2020 (n=1487) and the same calendar period of 2018 and 2019 (n=3004). The weekly admissions during the lockdown period decreased up to 22% compared to expectations from admission trends since 2018 (figure 1). During three consecutive lockdown weeks, the admission rate was lower than the 5% quantile of expectations (probability of observing at least that many extreme values without the lockdown: 0.38%). In a sensitivity analysis excluding patients with TIA, the drop in admission was even more pronounced, with four consecutive lockdown weeks falling under the 5% quantile of expectations (probability of 0.02% without the lockdown) (figure 1). A comparison to the years 2015-2019 did not change these findings (supplemental figure 1). The geographical analysis revealed the admission drop was more pronounced in regions with an average COVID-19 incidence than in regions with a high COVID-19 incidence (Figures 2a-b).

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of patients admitted during the lockdown period (2020) vs during the same calendar period in 2018 and 2019. The distribution of cerebrovascular events was statistically significantly different (p=0.006) with higher proportions of ICH (9.3% vs. 7.1%) and TIA (19% vs. 17%) and a lower proportion of ischemic strokes (72% vs. 76%) during the lockdown. Referral modes were statistically significantly different (p<0.001) during the lockdown, with more patients were admitted through emergency medical services (48% vs. 42%).

Etiologies of stroke were statistically significantly different (p=0.006) during the lockdown, with fewer proportion of cardioembolic strokes (20% vs 26%). There were no statistically significant differences for onset to door time. On admission, stroke severity (median NIHSS) was 2 (interquartile range 1 to 6) during the lockdown period vs. 3 (interquartile range 1 to 7) in 2018–2019 (p=0.07). There was no statistically significant difference in the proportion of patients treated with recanalization therapies, in the door-to-needle or door-to-groin times, nor in the disability and mortality rates between the lockdown period and the prior two years (Table 2).

Discussion

The main finding of this nationwide observational study is that weekly rates of cerebrovascular events fell by up to 22% during the Swiss national lockdown compared to expectations from admission trends from the years 2018–2019. It is very unlikely that this is explained by chance alone. We did not find evidence supporting assumptions that patients with milder strokes have not been admitted, since – during the lockdown – median NIHSS was lower compared to the previous two years. There were differences in the types and etiology of strokes with more ICH and fewer cardioembolic strokes during the lockdown.

According to a meta-analysis of 18 cohort studies including 67'845 patients, SARS-CoV-2 infection was associated with an increased odds of ischemic stroke (OR = 3.58, 95% CI = 1.43-8.92).[17] Yet, this did not translate into an observable increase of stroke admissions during the first peak of the pandemic. Instead, we observed a reduction in admissions for stroke, in line to what was reported for several other countries. For instance, in China, across 280 hospitals, there were fewer hospital admissions during the COVID-19 outbreak (-40%). [9] In the US, in the Get With The Guidelines-Stroke national registry, stroke presentations

decreased by an average of 15.3% per week between February 4, 2020 and June 29, 2020 compared with similar months in 2019.[18] In Joinville, Brazil, there were 36.4% fewer stroke admissions during the COVID-19 restrictions in the city compared to the same period in 2019, with no difference in admissions for severe stroke and ICH.[8] In Southern Spain, the number of hospital admissions was 25% lower compared to the previous months.[5] At Hospital Clinic of Barcelona, Spain, there was a 23% decline of stroke admissions compared to March 2019.[19] In two German academic centers, stroke admission rates decreased by 40% and 46% in the temporal context of the implementation of public health measures compared to 2019.[7]

As COVID-19 represents a risk factor for ischemic stroke, as seen in a large study from Sweden, the reduction in stroke admission during the lockdown is intriguing.[20] Possible reasons for fewer stroke admissions include [21] that strict "stay at home" orders and fear of infection may have led patients with milder strokes to not seek care. However, we found no supporting evidence for this assumption: during the lockdown period, symptom severity was lower compared to the previous years. We can only speculate on the underlying mechanisms for fewer admissions. Social isolation, especially among the elderly, may have contributed to underdetection of stroke by proxies or delayed detections without admission to a stroke unit or stroke center. It is possible that stroke incidence itself has declined, for instance due to behavioral and environmental changes during the lockdown. Indeed, long working hours are associated with a 33% relative risk increase of incident stroke.[22] Air pollutants have a marked and close temporal association with admissions to hospital for stroke or mortality from stroke, as seen in a meta-analysis of observational studies.[23] Behavioural changes may have reduced the incidence of other respiratory tract infections known to be associated with stroke.[24]

Despite the increase of referrals with emergency services, a lack of capacity in general or restrictions in acute stroke pathways are unlikely contributors to the observed decrease in admissions. In Switzerland, emergency services did not reach saturation although some patients had to be transferred to other hospitals. Moreover, we reminded all participating centers of the importance of completion of data entry during and after the first pandemic wave. We deem it unlikely that stroke underdiagnosis or reduced case ascertainement in the Swiss Stroke Registry can explain the reported admission drop compared to prepandemic years.

The rate of recanalization therapies remained constant during the pandemic, in line with international observations.[17] Door-to-needle and door-to-groin times did not change significantly during the lockdown period, similarly to what has been found in a recent international multicenter cohort study across 20 stroke centers in Europe and Israel.[25] In China, however, stroke care was temporarily reduced in the majority of the hospitals; accordingly, thrombolysis and thrombectomy rates dropped by about 25% compared to the same period in 2019.[9]

In regions with a high COVID19 incidence, we were expecting a more pronounced drop in stroke admission rates due to stricter adherence to stay-at-home instructions. The opposite was the case – regions with an average COVID19 incidence experienced a more pronounced drop. We can only speculate on possible reasons: in the high COVID 19 incidence regions, the incidence of acute cerebrovascular events may have been higher, or the threshold to seek medical attention for stroke symptoms lower.

An increase in the ICH proportion among hospitalized neurological patients was observed in the main hospital in Sarajevo (Bosnia-Herzegovinia), during the war from 1992 to 1995. However, also the proportion of patients with ischemic stroke increased, albeit less markedly.[26, 27] Proposed reasons include severe shortages of cardiovascular drugs and increased level of stress among the population.[25] During the Swiss lockdown, we do not have hints to reduced supply of cardiovascular drugs, so that the reason for the relative increase in ICH remain unknown.

The main strength of this study is the national scope and prospective design of the Swiss Stroke Registry, which had been established years before the COVID19 outbreak. This enabled us to examine the effect of the lockdown using data defined *a priori* from all certified Stroke Centers and Stroke Units in Switzerland. We used data in the two years prior to the pandemic to model fluctuations of admission rates and demonstrated that the observed decrease during the lockdown is very unlikely explained by chance. Moreover, the Swiss Stroke Registry includes patients treated with and without acute recanalization therapies, allowing for inclusions of a less selected study population and examination of the proportion of patients receiving acute therapy. There are several important limitations. First, the Swiss Stroke Registry captures only those patients admitted to certified Stroke Units and Stroke Centers – an estimated of 2/3 of all Swiss Stroke patients. It remains unclear how our findings can be generalized to hospitals not certified for acute stroke care. Second, statistical

power is limited to understand why the drop in stroke admission was more pronounced in regions with an average COVID19 incidence. Finally, despite the fact that our national criteria for Stroke Centers and Stroke Units are in line with ESO guidelines, differences in the type and severity of lockdown measures and pre-hospital services limit the generalizability of our findings outside of Switzerland.

In conclusion, fewer patients than expected were admitted for cerebrovascular events in Switzerland during the lockdown period in 2020. Stroke severity was lower during the lockdown. Importantly, the Swiss healthcare system was able to ensure the same high standard of stroke care with the same availability, speed of delivery and short-term outcome as in the years before without a pandemic crisis. The population should be informed to seek urgent medical care in the case of acute neurological symptoms, irrespective of the pandemic situation.

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Conflict of Interest Statement:

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Tables:

Table 1: Characteristics of patients admitted during the Swiss lockdown period* 2020 vs the same calendar period in 2018 and 2019

	2018-2019 (n = 3004)	**2020 (n = 1,487)**	***P***
Women, n (%)	1’293 (43)	611 (41)	0.2
Age, median (IQR)	75 (64–83)	75 (63–83)	0.3
NIHSS on admission, median (IQR)	3 (1, 7)	2 (1, 6)	0.07
Hypertension, n (%)	2’105 (74)	1’073 (74)	0.9
Hyperlipidemia, n (%)	1’741 (61)	904 (62)	0.6
Diabetes mellitus, n (%)	593 (21)	307 (21)	0.6
Atrial fibrillation, n (%)	663 (23)	303 (21)	0.06
History of stroke, n (%)	518 (18)	273 (19)	0.6
Event type, n (%)			0.006
Ischemic stroke	2’274 (76)	1,065(72)	
Intracerebral hemorrhage	213 (7.1)	138 (9.3)	
Transient ischemic attack	517 (17)	284 (19)	
Referral mode, n (%)			<0.001
Emergency service	1223 (42)	710 (48)	
Self-referral	635 (22)	273 (19)	
Family physician	344 (12)	194 (13)	
Other hospital	581 (20.5)	254 (17)	
Inhospital event	119 (4)	44 (3)	
Etiology of ischemic stroke, n (%)			0.001
Cardioembolic	679 (26)	268 (20)	
Large artery atherosclerosis	405 (16)	188 (14)	
More than one possible etiology	192 (7)	112 (9)	
Small vessel disease	286 (11)	150 (11)	
Other etiology	155 (6)	88 (7)	
Unknown	891 (34)	510 (39)	
Onset Time, n (%)			0.07

Known	1’972 (66)	933 (63)	
Unknown	629 (21)	355 (24)	
Wake-up Stroke	390 (13)	196 (13)	
mRS pre-hospital, n (%)			0.8
0–2	2’005 (90)	962 (90)	
3–5	228 (10)	105 (9.8)	

Legend: Statistics presented: median (interquartile range); n (%). IQR denotes interquartile range; NIHSS National Institute of Health Stroke Scale; mRS modified Rankin Score. Statistical tests performed: chi-square test of independence; Wilcoxon rank-sum test.

*from March 13th to April 26th

Table 2: Performance measures and 3-month outcomes of patients admitted during the lockdown period* 2020 vs the same calendar period in 2018 and 2019

	2018-2019 (n = 3004)	**2020 (n = 1,487)**	***P***
Onset to door time (minutes), median (IQR)	276 (106–934)	311 (105–1’039)	0.3
Intravenous thrombolysis, median (IQR)	481 (22%)	234 (22.1)	0.6
Door to IVT time (minutes) , median (IQR)	40 (30–61)	38 (29–55)	0.5
Endovascular treatment, median (IQR)	372 (17%)	159 (15%)	0.14
Door to groin time (minutes) , median (IQR)	84 (55–114)	80 (51–103)	0.3
mRS 90 days, n (%)			
Available mRS information (n, %)**	2270 (76%)	1241 (83%)	
0–2	1’512 (67%)	829 (67%)	
3–5	447 (20%)	247 (20%)	>0.9
6	311 (13%)	165 (13%)	

Legend: IQR denotes interquartile range; IVT intravenous thrombolysis; mRS modified Rankin Score. Statistical tests performed: chi-square test of independence; Wilcoxon rank-sum test.

* from March 13th to April 26th

** Percent refer to people with available mRS at 90 days

Figures:

Figure 1:

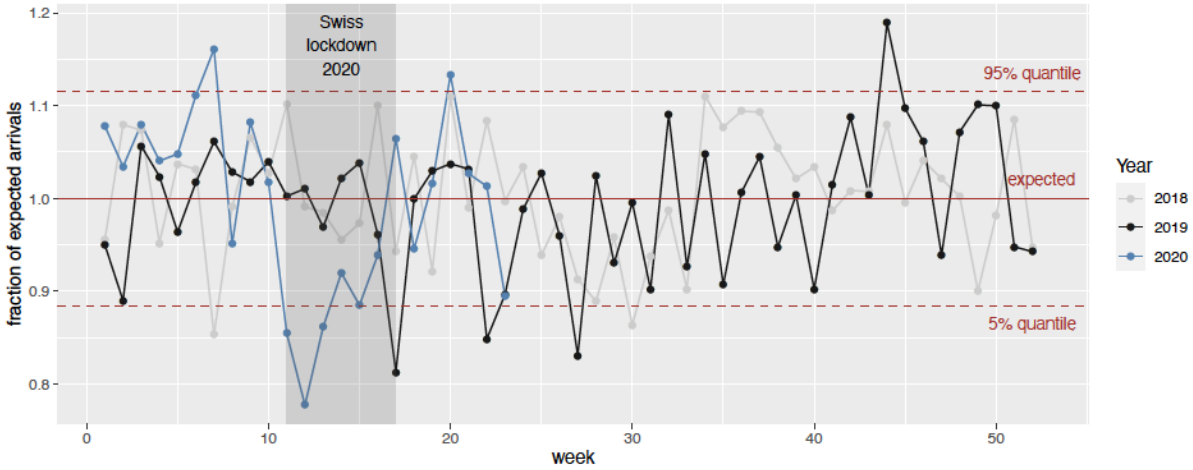

Figure 1: Weekly admissions registered in the Swiss Stroke Registry from January 1st, 2018 to June 8, 2020 (top). The linear regression is based on the data from 2018-2019. Week 53 has been removed for all years. Fractions when compared to the expected number of arrivals (bottom).

Figure 2a:

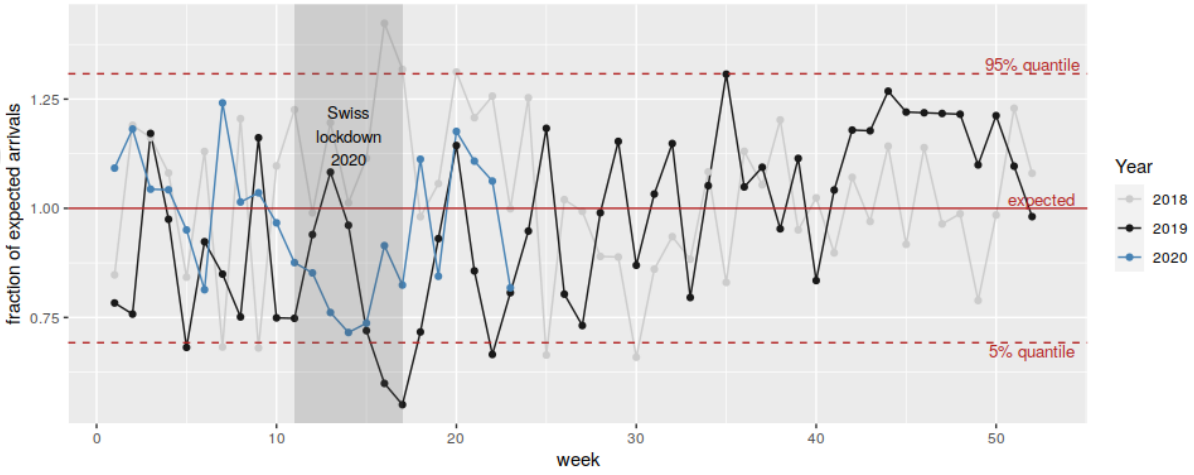

Figure 2b:

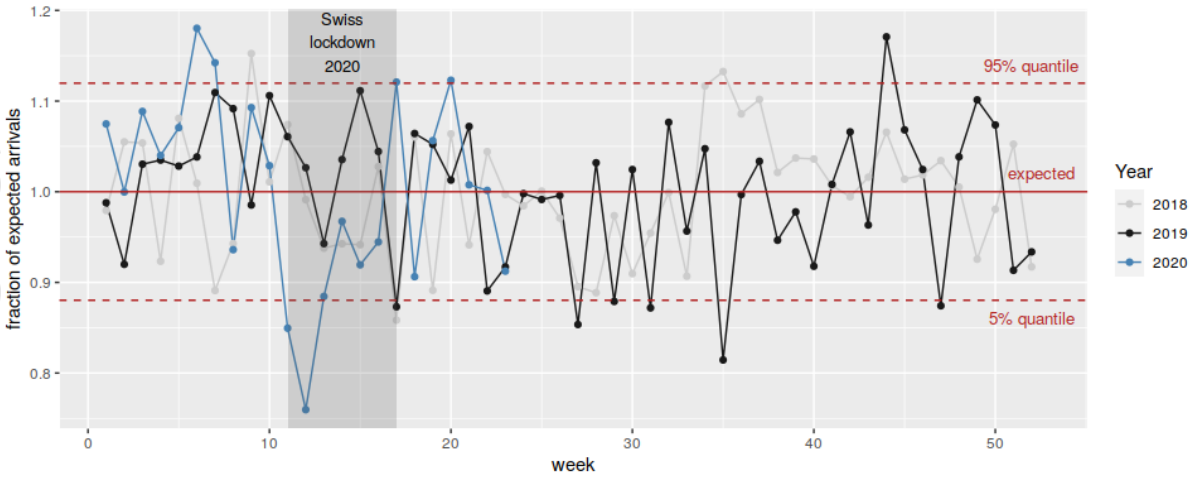

Figure 2 a-b: (a) High COVID-19 incidence regions (>700 COVID-19 cases/100'000 inhabitants, all regions located in the Italian and French speaking parts of Switzerland); (b) Average COVID-19 incidence regions. Weekly arrivals registered in the Swiss Stroke Registry from January 1st, 2018 to June 8, 2020 (top). The linear regression is based on the data from 2018-2019. Week 53 has been removed for all years. Fractions when compared to the expected number of arrivals (bottom).