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Hepatocellular carcinoma in South America: Evaluation of risk factors, demographics and therapy

Jose D. Debes¹ | Aaron J. Chan¹ | Domingo Balderramo² | Luciana Kikuchi³ | Esteban Gonzalez Ballerga⁴ | Jhon E. Prieto⁵ | Monica Tapias⁶ | Victor Idrovo⁶ | Milagros B. Davalos⁷ | Fernando Cairo⁸ | Fernando J. Barreyro⁹ | Sebastian Paredes¹⁰ | Nelia Hernandez¹¹ | Karla Avendaño¹¹ | Javier Diaz Ferrer⁷ | Ju Dong Yang¹² | Enrique Carrera¹³ | Jairo A. Garcia¹⁴ | Angelo Z. Mattos¹⁵ | Bruno S. Hirsch¹⁵ | Pablo T. Gonçalves¹⁵ | Flair J. Carrilho³ | Lewis R. Roberts¹²

¹Department of Medicine, University of Minnesota, Hennepin County Medical Center, Minneapolis, MN, USA

²Departamento de Gastroenterología, Hospital Privado Universitario de Córdoba, Instituto Universitario de Ciencias Biomédicas de Córdoba, Córdoba, Argentina

³Department of Gastroenterology, University of São Paulo School of Medicine, São Paulo, Brazil

⁴Department of Gastroenterology, Hospital Clinicas, Buenos Aires, Argentina

⁵Department of Gastroenterology, Organización Sanitas Colombia, Centro de enfermedades hepáticas y digestivas (CEHYD), Bogota, Colombia

⁶Department of Gastroenterology, Hospital Universitario Fundación Santa Fe y Organización Sánitas, Bogotá, Colombia

⁷Department of Gastroenterology, Hospital Nacional Edgardo Rebagliati Martins, HNERM, Lima, Peru

⁸Departamento de Gastroenterología, Hospital El Cruce, Buenos Aires, Argentina

⁹Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, Posadas, Argentina

¹⁰Departamento de Gastroenterología y Hepatología, Hospital Presidente Peron, Formosa, Argentina

¹¹Departamento de Gastroenterología y Hepatología, Hospital de Clinicas (UdelaR), Montevideo, Uruguay

¹²Department of Gastroenterology, Mayo Clinic College of Medicine, Rochester, MN, USA

¹³Departamento de Gastroenterología y Hepatología, Hospital Eugenio Espejo, Quito, Ecuador

¹⁴Fundación del Lili, Cali, Colombia

¹⁵Department of Gastroenterology, Hospital Nossa Senhora da Conceição-HNSC, Porto Alegre, Brazil

Correspondence

Jose D. Debes, Department of Medicine, Division of IDIM, University of Minnesota, Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Hennepin County Medical Center, Minneapolis, MN, USA.
Email: debes003@umn.edu

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Abstract

Background & Aims: Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) is the second leading cause of cancer-related death worldwide. Most studies addressing the epidemiology of HCC originate from developed countries. This study reports the preliminary findings of a multinational approach to characterize HCC in South America.

Methods: We evaluated 1336 HCC patients seen at 14 centres in six South American countries using a retrospective study design with participating centres completing a template chart of patient characteristics. The diagnosis of HCC was made radiographically or histologically for all cases according to institutional standards. Methodology of surveillance for each centre was following AASLD or EASL recommendations.

Results: Sixty-eight percent of individuals were male with a median age of 64 years at time of diagnosis. The most common risk factor for HCC was hepatitis C infection

Abbreviations: AASLD, American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases; AFP, alpha-fetoprotein; CI, confidence interval; EASL, European Society for the Study of the Liver; HBV, hepatitis B virus; HCC, hepatocellular carcinoma; HCV, hepatitis C virus; HR, hazard ratio; NAFLD, non-alcoholic fatty liver disease; NASH, non-alcoholic steatohepatitis; OR, odds ratio; PEI, percutaneous alcohol injection; RFA, radiofrequency ablation; TACE, transarterial chemoembolization.

(HCV, 48%), followed by alcoholic cirrhosis (22%), Hepatitis B infection (HBV, 14%) and NAFLD (9%). We found that among individuals with HBV-related HCC, 38% were diagnosed before age 50. The most commonly provided therapy was transarterial chemoembolization (35% of HCCs) with few individuals being considered for liver transplant (<20%). Only 47% of HCCs were diagnosed during surveillance, and there was no difference in age of diagnosis between those diagnosed incidentally vs by surveillance. Nonetheless, being diagnosed during surveillance was associated with improved overall survival ($P = .01$).

Conclusions: Our study represents the largest cohort to date reporting characteristics and outcomes of HCC across South America. We found an important number of HCCs diagnosed outside of surveillance programmes, with associated increased mortality in those patients.

KEYWORDS

demographics, hepatocellular carcinoma, risk factors, South America

1 | INTRODUCTION

Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) is the most common cancer originating from the liver, and it is universally associated with chronic liver disease and cirrhosis.¹ HCC is the fifth most common cancer in men and the second overall cause of cancer death accounting for 746,000 deaths worldwide.² Moreover, a recent study showed that in the United States, during the last 10 years, liver cancer diagnosis increased at a higher rate than any other cancer.³ Risk factors for HCC vary by geographical region.^{4,5} For instance, hepatitis B (HBV) and exposure to dietary aflatoxins have been identified as major risk factors in sub-Saharan Africa, while hepatitis C (HCV) has been recognized as a major risk factor in North America and Japan.^{4,6,7} Furthermore, alcohol consumption is thought to play a major role in the development of HCC and related mortality in Eastern Europe and Russia.⁵ There are also differences in age-based HCC surveillance protocols depending on the geographical origin of a person, with recommendations to screen earlier in patients of African or Asian origin with non-cirrhotic chronic hepatitis B infection.⁸ The largest burden of HCC is in the developing world, with most cases occurring in Asia and Africa.^{2,9,10} To date, studies have focused on characterizing patients with HCC in Europe, North America, Asia and, to a lesser extent, Africa.^{11,12} Moreover, most of the information about clinical outcomes from curative or palliative therapy originates from clinical trials, most of which are conducted in the United States, Europe or Asia.¹²⁻¹⁴ The largest study to date describing the demographics of HCC around the globe is the BRIDGE study.¹² This study showed the average age of HCC to be 61 years, and the most common associated risk factor to be HCV infection in all areas except for China, South Korea and Taiwan, where HBV was more common. However, this study did not include data from the regions of Africa and South America. A recent study by Yang et al. described the demographics of HCC in Africa.¹⁴ This study showed a much earlier age of HCC diagnosis in sub-Saharan Africa, mean of 47 years, with the most common associated risk factor being

Key points

- Our manuscript provides the most comprehensive study on liver cancer in South America. We found most common risk factor for liver cancer to be hepatitis C virus infection.
- A significant number of patients with hepatitis B virus infection had liver cancers diagnosed earlier than the recommended screening age.
- Over half of patients were diagnosed with liver cancer outside of surveillance programmes highlighting deficiencies in surveillance.
- The majority of individuals received TACE.

HBV infection. To date, little is known about the underlying demographic characteristics, risk factors and use of surveillance for HCC in South America. Moreover, there is a paucity of data, from clinical trials or daily clinical practice, about therapeutic options for HCC in this region. In this article, we describe for the first time the demographics of HCC in South America in a comprehensive fashion including data from six different countries in the region. This study represents the early results of a multinational effort to characterize HCC in South America.

2 | PATIENTS AND METHODS

2.1 | Data collection

We designed a retrospective cohort study aimed at identifying the demographics and risk factors associated with HCC in South America. A concerted effort was made to identify characteristics of HCC at the time of diagnosis. Overall, 14 medical centres from six countries in South America participated. Each centre was responsible for adhering

to their respective institutional review policies, and ethical approval was obtained from participating centres and Hennepin County Medical Center (supplementary data). No informed consent was obtained due to the retrospective nature of the study. Ten participating centres were considered academic (provided information on 1185 patients) and four centres were non-academic (provided information on 151 patients). The primary objective was to assess the epidemiology of HCC in different countries in South America, focusing mainly on risk factors, age and gender and associated clinical outcomes. Secondary objectives included assessment of therapies offered and evaluation of survival based on the presence of multiple variables.

Participating centres completed a standardized, retrospective chart review of patient characteristics at the time of HCC diagnosis, obtained from each centre's database. Data was then de-identified and placed into a composite database. Diagnosis of HCC was made radiographically or histologically for all cases as defined by institutional standards. Radiographically diagnosed cases were requested in accordance with AASLD or EASL guidelines, or comparable local guidelines.^{8,15,16} Variables abstracted included age, gender, chronic infection with viral hepatitis C (HCV) or hepatitis B (HBV), presence of alcohol abuse, evidence of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease spectrum or cryptogenic cirrhosis, and evidence of other underlying liver disease including cirrhosis. Select centres also provided additional data on HCC surveillance and alpha-fetoprotein (AFP) levels at the time of diagnosis and treatment. When more than one treatment was offered, only the first treatment was included, unless the treatment was in combination with liver transplantation, in that case liver transplantation was considered the main treatment. Diagnosis of HCC under surveillance programme in each centre was defined when a patient was undergoing systematic screening for HCC following either AASLD or EASL guidelines.

2.2 | Statistical analyses

Continuous variables were summarized as means or as medians (interquartile range, IQR, or range) according to their homogeneity. Categorical variables were compared with the chi-square test or Fisher's exact test when appropriate. Continuous variables were

compared with the Mann-Whitney *U* test or Student *t*-test. For regression models, we included predictors with $P < .05$ in the univariate analysis. Analyses of factors independently associated with cirrhosis at the time of HCC diagnosis and with administration of curative therapy for HCC were performed using logistic regression. An analysis of factors independently associated with survival after HCC diagnosis was performed using the Cox regression model.

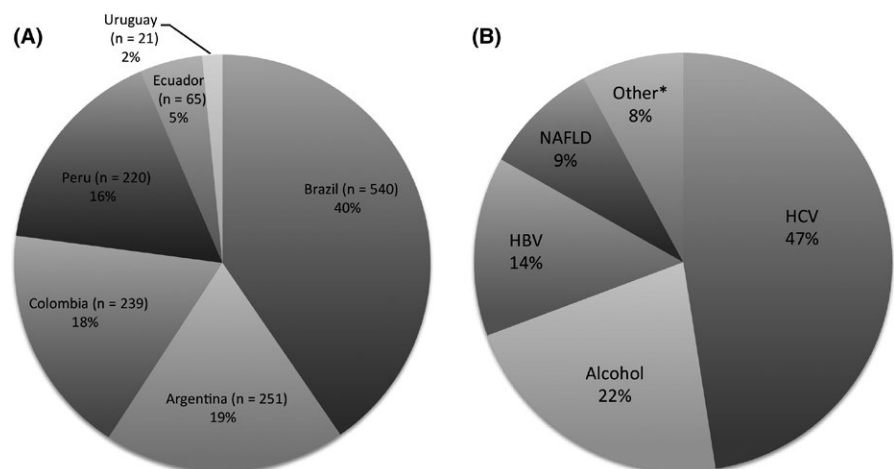
Survival rates after HCC diagnosis were computed from the day of diagnosis until death or the last follow-up visit using the Kaplan-Meier method and compared by using the log-rank test. Survival was corrected for lead-time bias using a similar approach as Cucchetti et al. and Mourad et al.^{17,18} Briefly, because there were no tumour size data in our database, we considered a lead-time of 7 months according to previous studies.^{17,18} Then, a probabilistic analysis (Monte-Carlo simulation) was applied to estimate the lead-time bias. A theoretical cohort of 1000 patients undergoing HCC screening was compared with a theoretical cohort of 1000 patients with a symptomatic diagnosis. Survival rates in relationship with surveillance programmes were properly calculated and reported in 10-year life expectancy before and after adjustment for lead-time bias, subtracting the lead-time from life expectancy.

Associations are reported as odds ratios (OR) or hazard ratios (HR) with 95% confidence intervals (CI). A two-sided $P < .05$ was considered to be significant. Statistical analysis was performed using the SPSS v 24.0 statistical package (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY).

3 | RESULTS

Fourteen centres from six countries across South America contributed data for an aggregate 1336 patients. Brazil accounted for 40% ($n = 540$) of patients, Argentina 19% ($n = 251$), Colombia 18% ($n = 239$), Peru 16% ($n = 220$), Ecuador 5% ($n = 65$) and Uruguay 2% ($n = 21$) (Figure 1A). Each centre provided information on HCC from a period between 5 and 10 years (depending on the centre), retrospectively, with the earliest report being from April 2005 and the latest from May 2015. Of the 1336 patients, 68% were male and the overall median age of both males and females was 64 years. A total of 1153

FIGURE 1 Distribution of hepatocellular carcinoma in South America. (A) Number of cases of hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) by contributing countries. (B) HCC risk factor distribution by country (HBV, hepatitis B virus; HCV, hepatitis C virus; NAFLD, non-alcoholic liver disease; alcohol, current alcohol consumption). Percentage reflects the percentage within the entire cohort



Country	Age ^a	% Males	% Cirrhotics ^b	AFP ^c	%AFP >20 ^c	% Curative treatment ^c
Argentina	65	74	86	76	60	23
Brazil	61	74	92	51	58	27
Colombia	67	64	95	20	46	49
Ecuador	56	48	72	4	27	32
Peru	67	59	85	90	63	4
Uruguay	65	86	100	11	50	32

^aAge: Median age in years.

^bNumber of patients with data about cirrhosis: Argentina: 112, Brazil: 380, Colombia: 125, Uruguay: 21, Peru: 220, Ecuador: 65.

^cMedian ng/ml, number of patients with AFP data: Argentina: 112, Brazil: 370, Colombia: 115, Uruguay: 18, Peru: 130, Ecuador: 65.

Number of patients with data on treatment: Argentina: 110, Brazil: 379, Colombia: 125, Uruguay: 20, Peru: 137, Ecuador: 65.

TABLE 1 Demographic and clinical characteristics of HCC per country

(86%) patients had complete data on risk factors for HCC (Table 1). The most common risk factor for HCC was HCV infection (48%), followed by alcoholic cirrhosis (22%), HBV infection (14%), NAFLD (9%) and other causes (8%) (Figure 1B). Twenty-nine percent of HCV and 18% of HBV patients also had alcohol consumption as a second risk factor. Comprising the “other causes” risk factor group were 44 patients with cryptogenic cirrhosis, 17 patients with hemochromatosis, 12 patients with autoimmune-related liver disease, 12 patients with HBV/HCV co-infection, four patients with primary biliary cirrhosis, four patients with schistosomiasis, two patients with drug-related liver injury and two with reported vascular complications. The distribution of risk factors was relatively homogeneous throughout the countries, with HCV and alcohol use being the two most common risk factors for HCC in all countries except Peru (Figure 2). Interestingly, in this country, HBV infection was the most important risk factor for HCC accounting for 34% of cases. Of those patients infected with HCV, 64% were males compared with 74% males in those infected

with HBV, 89% of individuals with alcohol-related liver disease and 56% of those with NAFLD-associated HCC. Age at time of diagnosis differed by independent risk factor as shown in Figure 2. When evaluating all new cases of HCC in individuals infected with HBV, we found that 38% (n = 48) of HCCs occurred before age 50, with a median age at diagnosis of 58 years, while in those infected with HCV, only 6% (n = 24) were diagnosed with HCC before age 50 (P < .001) and the median age of diagnosis was 63 years (percentage of cases per age group described in Figure 3). Even larger differences were observed when HBV-induced HCC was compared with NAFLD, median age at diagnosis was 67 years (P < .001) and alcohol-induced HCC, median age at diagnosis was 68 years (P < .001).

Extended data were provided by eight centres from the six countries (Figure 4). Descriptive statistics were calculated to determine the proportion of HCC diagnoses that were made during regular surveillance for HCC, as well as to evaluate AFP levels at the time of diagnosis. Of 732 patients for whom screening information was available, we

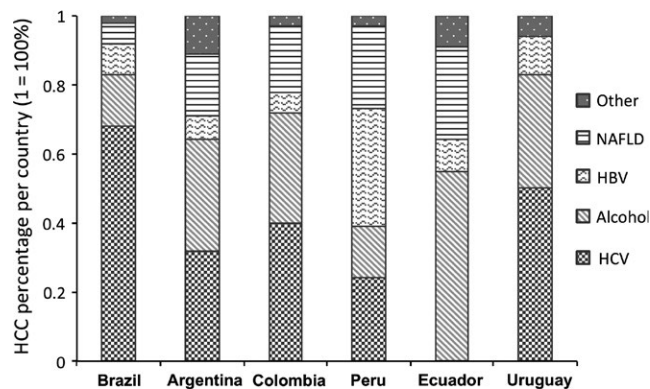


FIGURE 2 Distribution of risk factors for hepatocellular carcinoma within each country. Y-axis represents percentage of the cases per each country (1 represents 100%); X-axis represents each country. Filling of bar correlates with description of each risk factor, corresponding to percentage of risk factor within the total of each country. NAFLD, non-alcoholic liver disease; HBV, hepatitis B virus; HCV, hepatitis C virus

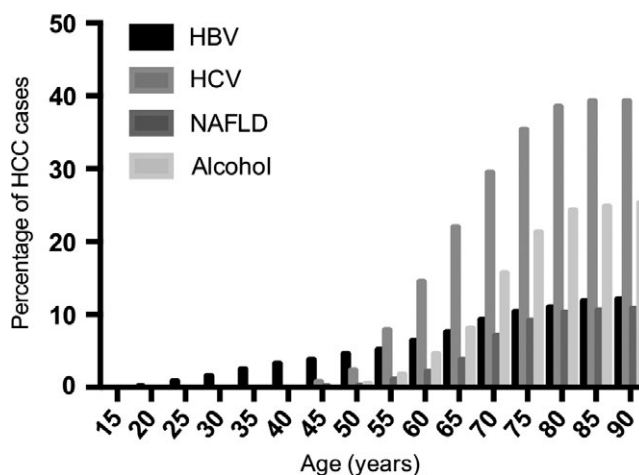


FIGURE 3 Percentage of cases hepatocellular carcinoma per age group and associated risk factor. Y-axis represents precedence of HCCs per risk factor, X-axis represents age in 5-year intervals. NAFLD, non-alcoholic liver disease; HBV, hepatitis B virus; HCV, hepatitis C virus

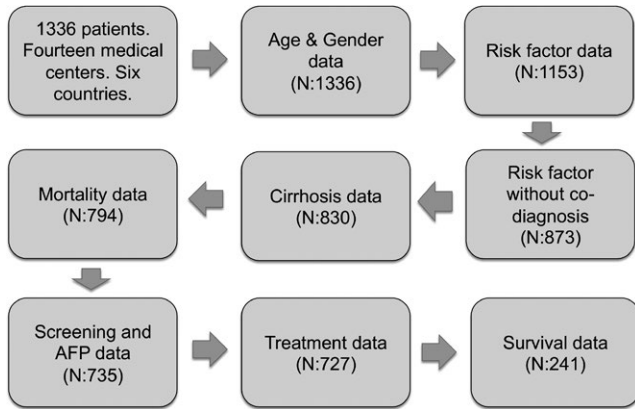


FIGURE 4 Flow chart of patients with specific data based on collection from all centres

found that only 343 (47%) were diagnosed with HCC during surveillance as defined by institutional standards. The median ages of those diagnosed during surveillance vs. incidental or symptom-based diagnosis were not significantly different, both being 64 years ($P = .967$). Median time of follow-up was 49 months (IQR:27-65 months).

Using logistic regression models, we found that HCV (OR 3.25, 95% CI 1.63-7.08, $P = .001$) and alcoholic liver disease (OR 3.82, 95% CI 1.46-13.17, $P = .005$) were significantly associated with the presence of cirrhosis at the time of HCC diagnosis, while other risk factors were not. We also examined the risk factors associated with a higher likelihood of receiving curative therapy, defined as resection, transplantation, radiofrequency ablation (RFA) or percutaneous ethanol ablation (PEA). We found significant associations of cirrhosis (OR 3.96, 95% CI 2.09-7.44, $P < .001$), having been diagnosed during surveillance (OR 2.22, 95% CI 1.43-3.48, $P < .001$) and AFP >200 ng/ml (OR 2.29, 95% CI 1.25-4.24, $P = .007$) with receipt of curative therapy. A proportional hazards model was then used to evaluate survival. Having underlying HCV (HR: 0.74, 95% CI 0.56-0.98, $P = .042$) and being diagnosed under surveillance (HR: 0.62 (95% CI 0.48-0.78, $P < .001$) were both significantly associated with decreased mortality (Table 2). Survival rates after HCC diagnosis were higher in patients that underwent

TABLE 2 Analysis of survival of HCC patients within different variables

Variable	Mean survival (months)	Standard deviation	P	RR
HBV	7.3	7.4	0.063	1.43 (95% CI 0.98-2.07)
HCV	13.6	12	0.042 ^a	0.74 (95% CI 0.56-0.98)
Alcohol	11.3	9	0.169	0.79 (95% CI 0.56-1.10)
NAFLD	10	9.2	0.383	1.21 (95% CI 0.78-1.83)
Cirrhosis	11	10.1	0.128	1.44 (95% CI 0.90-2.42)
Screening	14.4	11	<0.001 ^a	0.62 (95% CI 0.48-0.78)
AFP >20 mg/ml	10.1	9.8	0.466	1.12 (95% CI 0.82-1.54)
AFP >200 ng/ml	9.5	10.2	0.501	1.10 (95% CI 0.83-1.49)
Curative therapy	17.3	10.1	0.222	0.79 (95% CI 0.53-1.15)

^aStatistically significant value. CI, confidence interval; RR, risk ratio.

AFP, alpha-fetoprotein; HBV, hepatitis B virus; HCV, hepatitis C virus; NAFLD, non-alcoholic steatohepatitis.

screening after lead-time correction (log rank $P = .001$). The median life expectancy in the screening group before and after lead-time correction was 47.3 months (IQR 34.3-66.1 months) and 40.4 months (IQR 27.3-59.1 months), respectively (Table 3). In the symptomatic diagnosis group, the median life expectancy was 24.6 months (IQR 14.4-45.9 months).

We assessed treatment data on 727 patients from the six countries (all centres that provided such information). Specific treatment modalities for each country varied widely per country and are described in Figure 5. Transarterial chemoembolization (TACE) was the most commonly used method as first therapeutic approach (269 patients) regardless of whether tumours were found incidentally or during screening (37% and 35% of HCCs respectively). Palliative treatment (aside from TACE) was the second most often used modality (218 patients), with an overall of 30% of patients being offered such approach. Only 50 patients (7%) underwent radiofrequency ablation (RFA) as first approach, although it should be noted that 78% of those tumours treated by RFA were found during screening. Only eight participating centres performed liver transplantation, and 120 patients underwent a liver transplant as a therapeutic option for HCC. The great majority of tumours (95%) that were treated with liver transplantation were found during screening, but across the board, with the exception of Colombia (43%), the option of liver transplantation was available to less than 20% of the patients, and as low as 4% in some cases as Brazil, likely reflecting the advanced stage of presentation.

4 | DISCUSSION

This study provides the first comprehensive description of risk factors, demographics, data on surveillance, and therapy offered for HCC in the continental region of South America.

When comparing our data from South America to results from the BRIDGE Study by Park et al., the overall demographics and age at the time of diagnosis in our South American cohort were similar to the results from North America, Europe and Japan.⁷ However, we found that 38% of HCCs in HBV-infected individuals occurred before age 50. This

Follow-up	Surveillance	Symptomatic diagnosis	P value
1 year, % (95% CI)	78.7 (74.5-82.9)	59.8 (54.8-64.9)	<0.001
3 years, % (95% CI)	52.2 (46.6-57.7)	36.3 (30.8-41.8)	<0.001
5 years, % (95% CI)	30.6 (24.7-36.4)	25.7 (20.3-31.4)	0.22

TABLE 3 Overall survival according to surveillance (N:739)

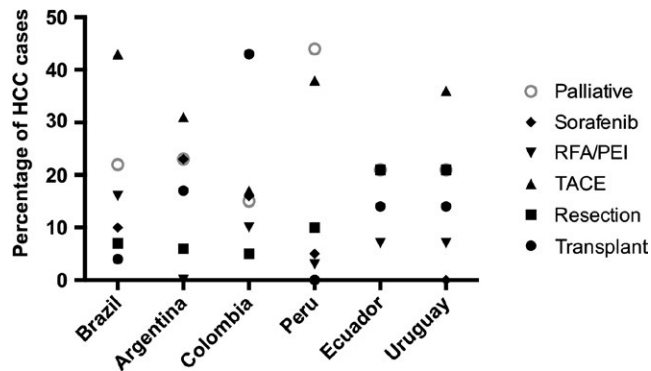


FIGURE 5 Treatment for HCC distribution within each country. Symbol in the figure correlates with specific treatment on the side legend. Information about transplantation as treatment was included only in those centres that perform liver transplantation. Upper limit of 0.5 in the Y-axis represents 50% of the total number of cases treated in each country. X-axis represents each country. When more than one treatment was offered per patient, only the first treatment was included, unless the treatment was in combination with liver transplantation in which the later one was used

finding is concerning and questions whether current guidelines are appropriate for the region. Moreover, our results suggest the presence of unknown environmental factors in the region that could predispose to HCC. The early-age diagnosis of HBV-related HCC has usually been reported from Africa and in association to aflatoxin exposure.¹⁹ Exposure to aflatoxins affects the TP53 gene, and this is thought to lead to a rapid occurrence of HBV-induced HCC.^{19,20} Aflatoxins have not been thought to represent a major risk factor in South America, although aflatoxin-associated p53 mutations have been found in HBV-related HCCs in a small Brazilian study.²¹

Similar to other populations, we found that HCV and alcoholic liver disease were associated with the presence of cirrhosis at the time of HCC diagnosis.^{22,23} This reflects the observation that both HBV and NASH-induced HCC have a higher propensity to develop in individuals without cirrhosis. Interestingly, the presence of NALFD was not a major single risk factor associated with HCC. This was a rather surprising finding since the NALFD prevalence is higher in South America than in other regions of the world.²⁴ Although we did not specifically address the presence of NALFD within other risk factors, such as HCV or HBV infection, it is probable that the underlying presence of fatty liver contributed to HCC when combined with other risk factors.^{25,26} Nonetheless, it is possible that the clinical presentation of NALFD in the region differs from that of other parts of the world with a lower propensity to HCC.²⁵ More research in this area will be needed with studies addressing biopsy-proven NALFD or NASH as well as detailed risk factor exposure, in order to address this question.

We found that the presence of cirrhosis, a diagnosis of HCC during surveillance or an AFP >200 ng/dl was associated with receiving curative therapies. AFP levels varied quite significantly between countries, with Argentina and Peru showing higher medians of AFP on HCC diagnosis (>50 ng/ml) and Ecuador showing a lower median AFP of 4 ng/ml. This finding is similar to that of the BRIDGE study, which found large differences between regions (25 ng/ml in Europe and 219 ng/ml in China).¹² It is unclear whether these differences represent lack of standardization of AFP testing or variable clinical behaviour of the tumours. We did not find, however, a significant correlation with AFP levels and survival. The presence of cirrhosis in our cohort correlated with receipt of curative therapy, but did not correlate positively with survival. Edenvik et al. in Europe did not study the association between cirrhosis and survival. However, the authors found a significant association between cirrhosis and missed surveillance, which did indeed correlate with higher mortality.²⁷ Improved survival was seen in patients with HCV and in those who were diagnosed while under regular surveillance. Survival rates for those on HCC surveillance were significant at 1 and 3 years on the lead-time analysis, but were not significant at 5 years. However, our follow-up period was shorter than in other studies likely leading to a non-significant difference at 5 years. Interestingly, the receipt of curative therapy was not associated with a survival benefit; however, one could postulate that this is due to selection bias as patients who are still living at the time of the study were unlikely to have a date of death included in the data set and were thus excluded from the analysis. It is concerning that over half of the individuals in our study had HCCs diagnosed outside of surveillance programmes. However, a low rate of HCC diagnosis through surveillance programmes represents a well-known deficiency around the world.^{28,29} In this regard, Edenvik et al. reported a 30% HCC diagnosis through surveillance in Sweden and Singal et al. reported 24% surveillance screening, which improved to 47% after outreach.^{27,30} Although our data are preliminary, we found a survival advantage for those diagnosed during surveillance, and therefore, more emphasis on adherence to surveillance programmes should be encouraged in the region. Edenvik et al. had similar findings in an European cohort. Interestingly, in that study although the rate of curative treatment was similar in HCCs diagnosed through surveillance or not, those diagnosed under surveillance programmes had a significant survival benefit.²⁷

In those patients from whom we had treatment information, the majority was offered either curative therapy or disease modifying approach with only 30% being offered a palliative option. TACE was the most frequently first used therapeutic modality with liver transplantation being the less used modality, and this remained constant throughout the different countries. These findings are similar to those in the United States, China, Japan and Europe and likely reflect diagnosis of HCC at late stages.¹² The use of resection, RFA/PEI, liver

transplantation and sorafenib did vary among the countries and likely reflects regional differences in clinical practice due to access and cost. Despite liver transplantation being the most efficacious treatment, very few patients received this therapy. In South America, this is likely related to an inadequate availability of donors, but also possibly affected but a less efficient system to identify suitable candidates. A high percentage of individuals (30%) were offered palliative approach, only, as therapy. This is concerning, and likely related to a high percentage of patients diagnosed with HCC by symptom presentation and not during surveillance. Much improvement is needed in health-related infrastructure and organization, to detect HCCs earlier in order for a possible referral to a transplant centre and a curative approach being possible. Interestingly, 116 patients (16%) underwent treatment with sorafenib. The frequency of use and success rate of the multi-kinase inhibitor have been evaluated in multiple regions, but only one study has addressed its efficacy in Hispanic individuals within the context of a larger cohort of patients.³¹

The limitations of this study include its retrospective nature and the absence of validated information on the standards used for determining NAFLD spectrum or alcohol misuse disorders. There was also selection bias as site participation was voluntary and some countries were only represented by one centre. However, it is likely that the large sample size partially overcomes such confounding. However, due to the size of the studied population and difference in centres, some interactions between variables are difficult to account for and therefore results should be interpreted with some caution. Moreover, due to a large proportion of data collected through paper charts, we did not properly address Barcelona Clinic Liver Cancer Stage in all patients. As our research network develops a prospective assessment of HCC in South America, we expect to address these variables.

In summary, our study represents the largest cohort to date addressing HCC in South America. Similar to North America, Europe and Japan, HCC in South America is most often diagnosed in older males, with HCV being the predominant risk factor. We also highlight a large number of patients with HBV in South America diagnosed at an early age. The most commonly used treatment modality was TACE with liver transplantation being the less frequently used. As in many other countries and continents around the globe, HCC surveillance is underutilized in South America.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None of the authors has competing interests to disclose.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional Supporting Information may be found online in the supporting information tab for this article.

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