Association of Pretreatment Tumor Characteristics and Clinical Outcomes Following Second-Line Axicabtagene Ciloleucel Versus Standard of Care in Patients With Relapsed/Refractory Large B-Cell Lymphoma

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BACKGROUND

- Axicabtagene ciloleucel (axi-cel) is an autologous anti-CD19 chimeric antigen receptor (CAR) T-cell therapy approved for the treatment of adult patients with relapsed/refractory (R/R) large B-cell lymphoma (LBCL) after ≥2 lines of systemic therapy and most recently, in the United States, for R/R LBCL after first-line chemoimmunotherapy[1]
- In the Phase 3 randomized ZUMA-7 (NCT03391466) in second-line (2L) R/R LBCL[2]:
  - Axi-cel showed superiority to standard of care (SOC; salvage chemotherapy and high-dose chemotherapy with autologous stem cell transplantation [HDT-ASCT]) in event-free survival (EFS; hazard ratio, 0.398, P<.0001; median 8.3 vs 2 months, respectively; 24-month EFS rate: 41% vs 16%, respectively; 24.9-month median follow-up)
  - Axi-cel had a manageable safety profile that was consistent with that observed in the ZUMA-1 study of axi-cel in patients with refractory LBCL[3,4]
- In ZUMA-1, the strongest correlate of durable response was peak CAR T-cell levels normalized to pretreatment tumor burden[3]
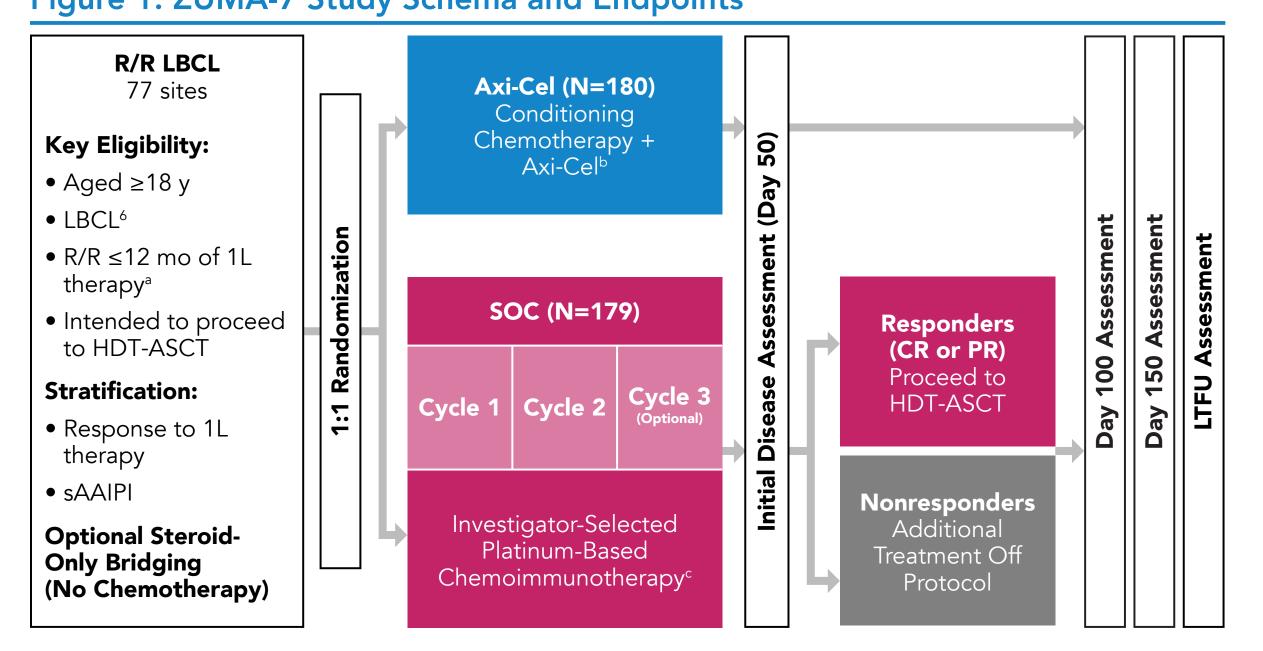
OBJECTIVE

- To report results of exploratory analyses of tumor characteristics, including pretreatment tumor burden, tissue hypoxia-related lactate dehydrogenase (LDH) level, tumor gene expression signatures, and CD19 expression in ZUMA-7

METHODS

Figure 1. ZUMA-7 Study Schema and Endpoints

- Tumor burden was calculated as the sum of product diameters (SPD) of ≤6 reference lesions[5]
- Serum LDH was assessed per local laboratory
- Pretreatment tumor samples were assessed for gene expression by the NanoString IO 360™ panel and for prespecified immune contexture signatures related to T-cell function and trafficking (Immunosign 15 [IS15] and 21 [IS21])[6]
- ZUMA-1 Cohorts 1 and 2 data were used for comparison to third-line R/R LBCL
- CD19 protein expression was assessed by immunohistochemistry (H-score)
- Associations between biomarkers and clinical outcomes were assessed using descriptive statistics (P<.05 was considered significant)
- EFS was defined as time from randomization to the earliest date of disease progression per Lugano Classification,[5] commencement of new lymphoma therapy, or death from any cause
- Response definitions were defined according to response at same time of data cutoff (primary analysis) and were as follows:
  - Ongoing responders: patients who achieved a complete or partial response and remained in response
  - Relapsed: patients who achieved a complete response (CR) or partial response and subsequently experienced disease progression
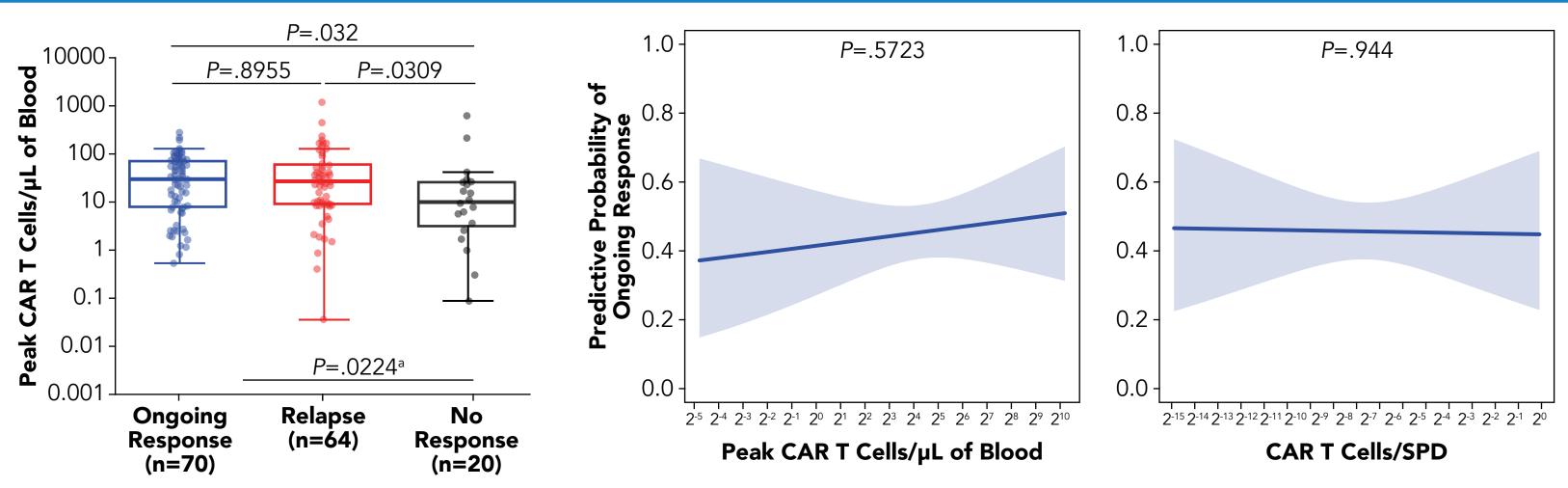 - Nonresponders: patients who experienced stable or progressive disease as best response

RESULTS

Table 1. Baseline Tumor Characteristics

Characteristic	Axi-Cel N=170	SOC N=168	Overall N=338	ZUMA-1[a] Cohorts 1+2 N=101
Elevated LDH level, n (%)[b]	92 (54)	90 (54)	182 (54)	62 (61)
LDH ≥2× ULN, n (%)[b]	43 (25)	36 (21)	79 (23)	45 (45)
Median tumor burden[c] (Q1-Q3), [range], mm²	2118 (981-4368) [181-22,538]	2069 (926-4881) [252-20,117]	2115 (942-4755) [181-22,538]	3723 (2200-7138) [171-23,297]
Median CD19 H-score (range)[d]	140 (0-300)	160 (0-280)	150 (0-300)	210 (0-300)

[a] ZUMA-1 baseline tumor characteristics are shown for reference purposes. [b] LDH level greater than ULN per local laboratory reference range. [c] As determined by the sum of product diameters of ≤6 reference lesions.[5] [d] CD19 staining was not required for participation in the trial. Testing was retrospectively conducted per central laboratory. Numbers of patients included in median CD19 H-score were 170 in the axi-cel arm, 168 in the SOC arm, and 338 overall.
Axi-cel, axicabtagene ciloleucel; LDH, lactate dehydrogenase; Q, quartile; SOC, standard of care; ULN, upper limit of normal.

- Baseline tumor characteristics were generally balanced between axi-cel and SOC patients (Table 1)
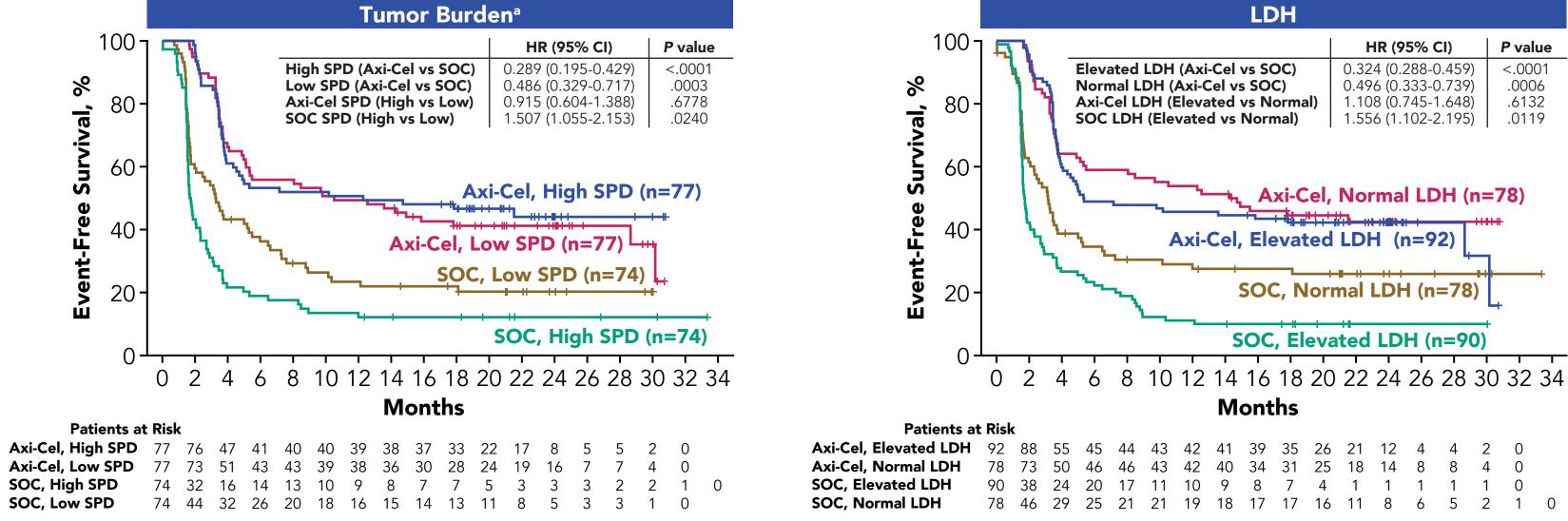
Figure 2. CAR T-Cell Expansion Was Associated With Response, But Not Ongoing Response, in ZUMA-7

P values calculated by Wilcoxon Rank-Sum test. [a] Shown P value comparing combined ongoing response and relapse versus no response.
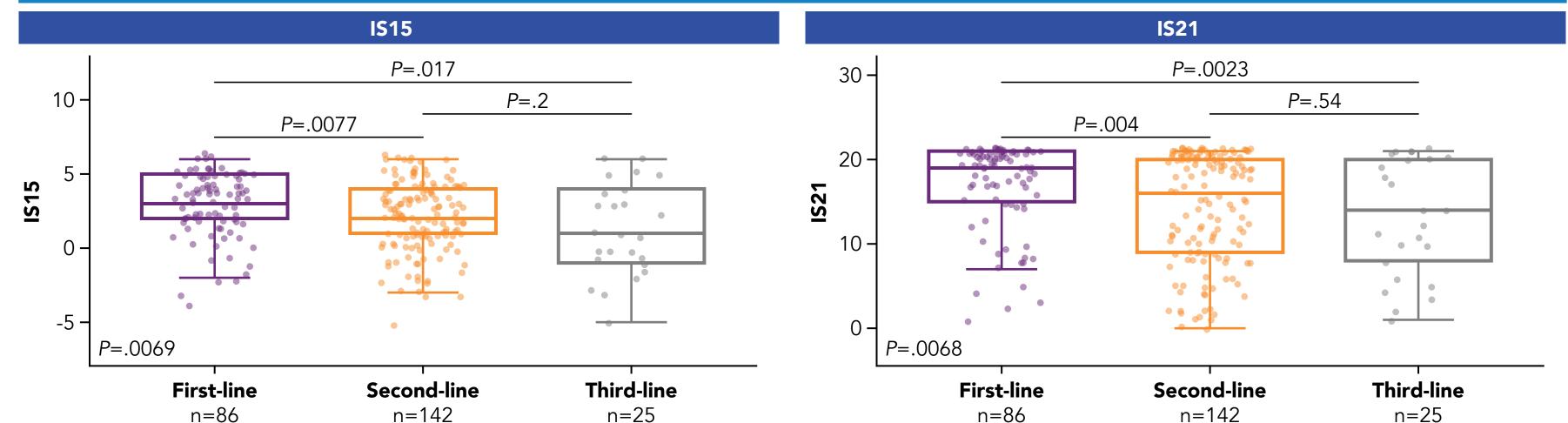CAR, chimeric antigen receptor; SPD, sum of product diameters.

- CAR T-cell expansion (peak) was significantly lower in patients who did not respond compared with patients in ongoing response or who relapsed (P<.05; Figure 2, left)
- There was no association between ongoing responses and CAR T-cell peak (Figure 2, middle) or CAR T-cell peak normalized to tumor burden (Figure 2, right)
- Additionally, peak CAR T-cell expansion was comparable between patients with high and low CD19 H-score (above vs below median CD19 H-score, P=.6704; data not shown)
- Consistent results were observed in the subgroup of patients who were followed up for at least 1 year (data not shown)
- CAR T-cell expansion (peak and area under the curve [AUC]) and tumor burden were lower in ZUMA-7 compared with ZUMA-1 (P<.05), whereas CAR T-cell peak expansion normalized to SPD was comparable between ZUMA-1 and ZUMA-7 (P=.5579; data not shown)
  - Sampling bias may have partly contributed to the differences in correlative analysis with ZUMA-1 Cohorts 1 and 2, as there were fewer collections on Day 14 for ZUMA-7 compared with ZUMA-1

Figure 3. Event-Free Survival in Major Prognostic Subgroups in ZUMA-7

[a] Tumor burden was defined as high (>median) or low (≤median) SPD.
Axi-cel, axicabtagene ciloleucel; HR, hazard ratio; LDH, lactate dehydrogenase; SOC, standard of care; SPD, sum of product diameters.
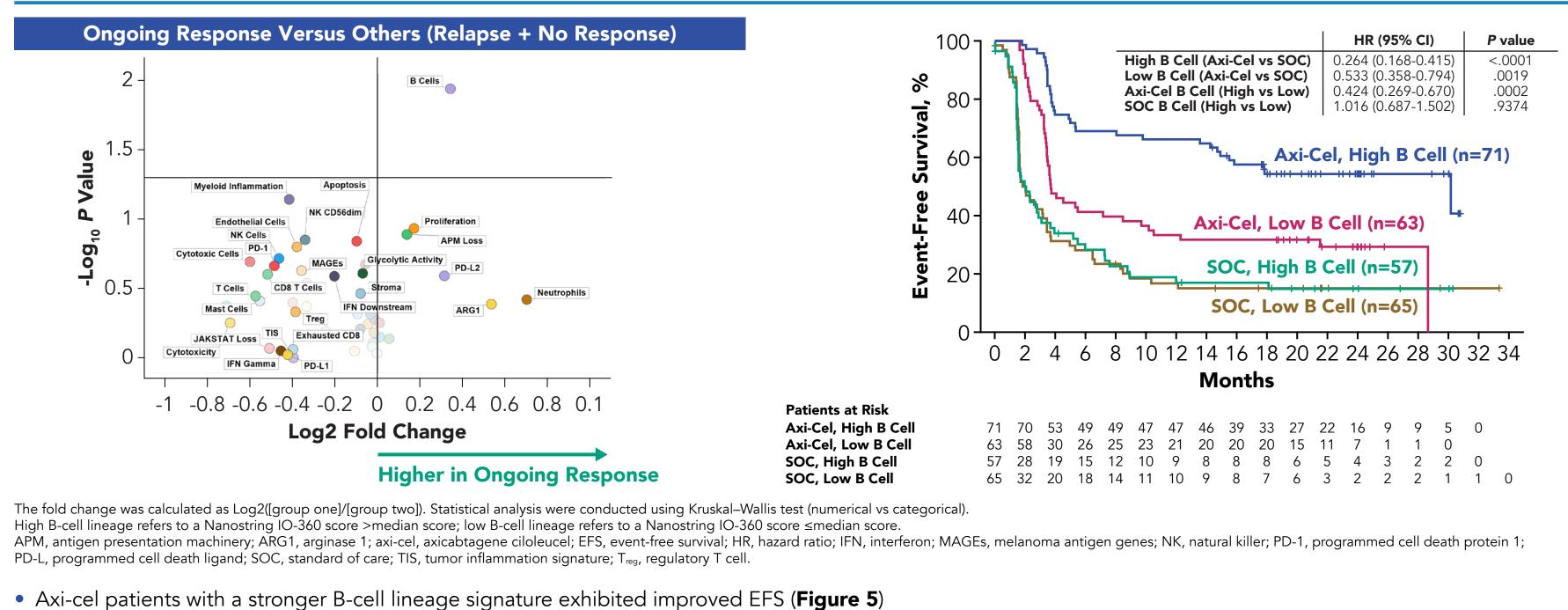
- Axi-cel EFS was superior to SOC arm regardless of tumor burden, LDH (Figure 3), or molecular subclass (germinal center B-cell–like [GCB] vs non-GCB–like; data not shown)
- Tumor burden and LDH strongly associated with each other (data not shown)
- Tumor burden and LDH negatively associated with EFS in SOC patients
- Consistent results were observed with a 3721 mm³ threshold of tumor burden for high versus low groups (median from ZUMA-1 Cohorts 1 and 2) and with a 2× upper limit of normal LDH threshold (data not shown)

Figure 4. Immunosign 15 (IS15) and 21 (IS21) Indices Suggested a Favorable Immune Contexture in Earlier Lines of Therapy

First-line samples were obtained from ZUMA-7 biopsies collected before first-line therapy (archival); second-line samples were obtained from ZUMA-7 biopsies collected after first-line therapy; third-line samples were obtained from ZUMA-1 biopsies collected after last line of therapy.
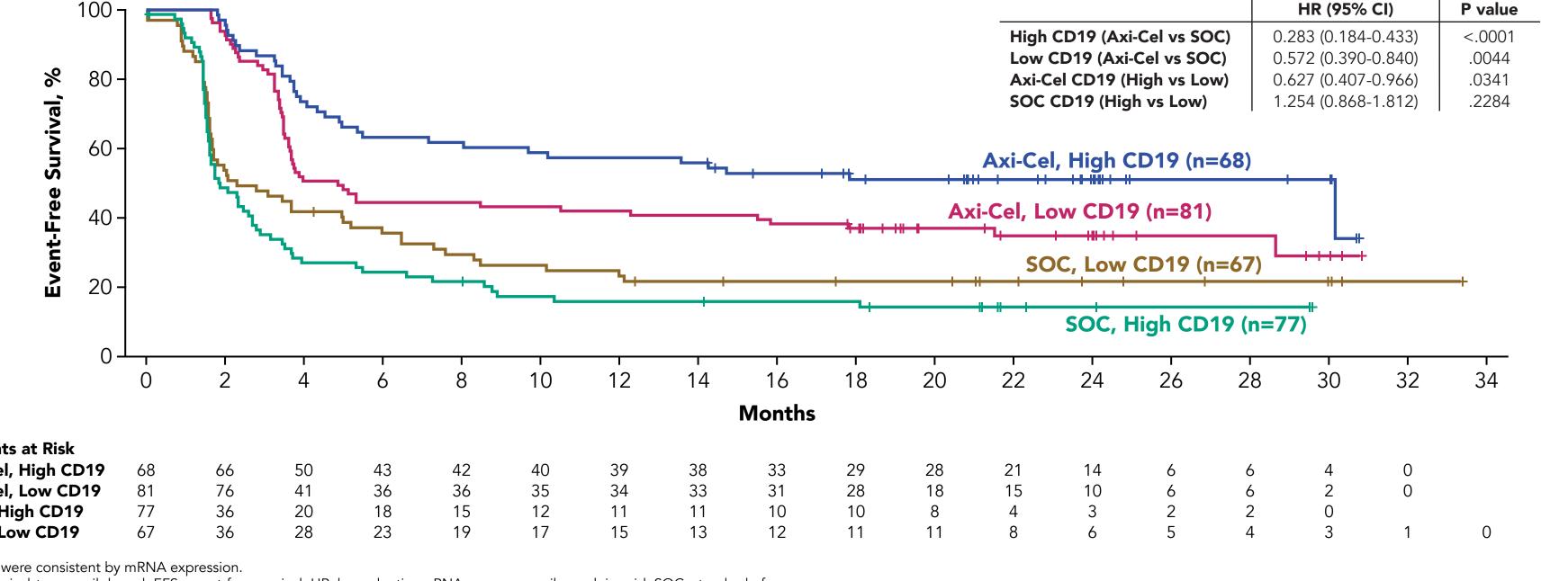IS, Immunosign.

- IS15 and IS21 decreased through lines of therapy, possibly underlying a more favorable tumor microenvironment (TME) immune contexture in earlier lines (Figure 4)
- IS21 previously associated with CR rate and PFS following treatment with axi-cel in third-line of therapy[9]

Figure 5. Associations of B-Cell Lineage Nanostring Signature With Improved EFS in ZUMA-7

The fold change was calculated as Log2([group one]/[group two]). Statistical analysis were conducted using Kruskal-Wallis test (numerical vs categorical). High B-cell lineage refers to a Nanostring IO-360 score >median score; low B-cell lineage refers to a Nanostring IO-360 score ≤median score.
APM, antigen presentation machinery; ARG1, arginase 1; axi-cel, axicabtagene ciloleucel; EFS, event-free survival; HR, hazard ratio; IFN, interferon; MAGEs, melanoma antigen genes; NK, natural killer; PD-1, programmed cell death protein 1; PD-L, programmed cell death ligand; SOC, standard of care; TIS, tumor inflammation signature; T_{reg}, regulatory T cell.

- Axi-cel patients with a stronger B-cell lineage signature exhibited improved EFS (Figure 5)
  - B-cell lineage signature refers to a predefined signature from Nanostring IO-360, derived from a proprietary algorithm incorporating gene expression values of BLK, CD19, MS4A1, TNFRSF17, FCRL2, FAM30A, PNOC, SPIB, and TCL1A
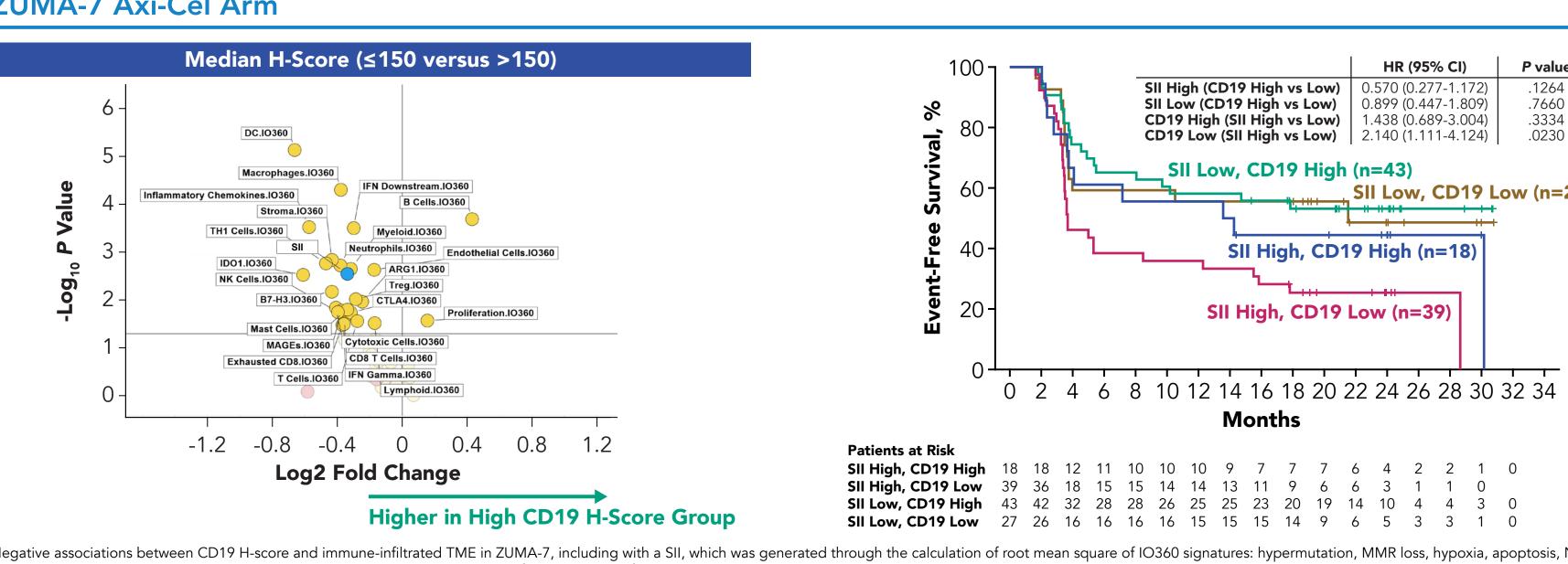
Figure 6. Axi-Cel Showed Improved EFS Versus SOC Regardless of CD19 Protein Expression[a]

[a] Results were consistent by mRNA expression.
Axi-cel, axicabtagene ciloleucel; EFS, event-free survival; HR, hazard ratio; mRNA, messenger ribonucleic acid; SOC, standard of care.

- Axi-cel remained superior to SOC irrespective of high (>median) or low (≤median) CD19 expression protein/H-score; Figure 6)
- Patients deemed CD19 negative by immunohistochemistry (H-score <5) still presented substantial responses to axi-cel with 85% objective response rate (ORR) versus 67% ORR in the SOC arm (data not shown)
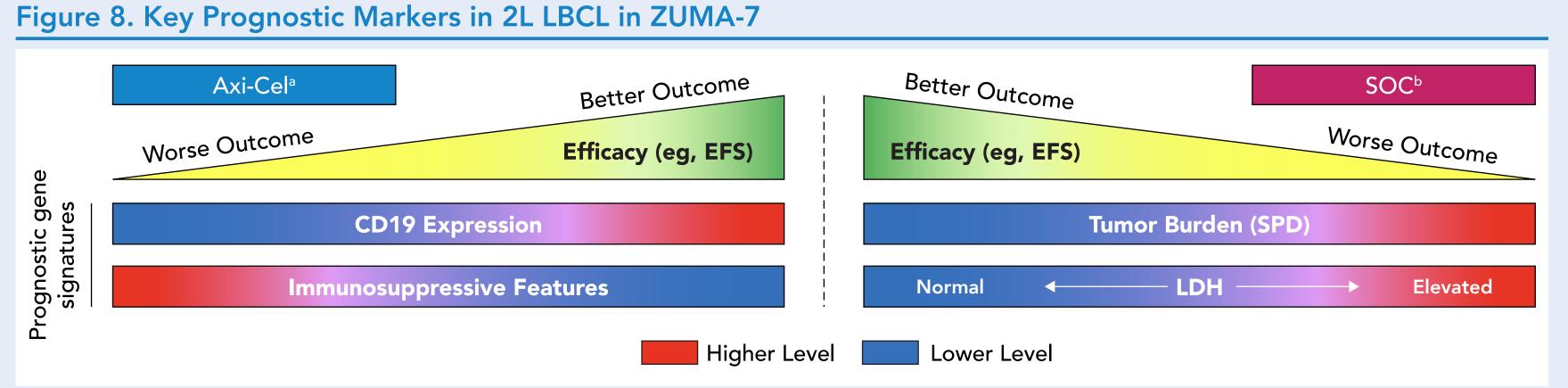
Figure 7. Association Between Efficacy and CD19 Expression (H-Score) in the Context of Immunosuppression in the ZUMA-7 Axi-Cel Arm

Negative associations between CD19 H-score and immune-infiltrated TME in ZUMA-7, including with a SII, which was generated through the calculation of root mean square of IO360 signatures: hypermutation, MMR loss, hypoxia, apoptosis, NOS2, MAGEs, mast cells, TGF-beta, ARG1, endothelial cells, stroma, B7-H3, myeloid inflammation. The fold change was calculated as Log2[group one]/[group two]). Statistical analysis were conducted using Kruskal-Wallis test (numerical vs categorical). Only the predefined IO360 signatures and the immunosuppressive cluster are depicted.
ARG1, arginase 1; IFN, interferon; IS, Immunosign; MAGEs, melanoma antigen genes; MMR, mismatch repair; NK, natural killer; NOS, nitric oxide synthase; TH1, T helper type 1; TGF, transforming growth factor; SII, Stromal and Immunosuppressive Index; T_{reg}, regulatory T cell; TME, tumor microenvironment.

- Lower CD19 protein expression (H-score) overlapped with a more complex/immune-infiltrated TME, possibly enriched with a number of immunosuppressive features, including regulatory T cells, markers of T-cell exhaustions, ARG1, IDO1, B7-H3, CTLA4, and macrophage and myeloid gene expression signatures (Figure 7)
  - This underscores that the reduced efficacy of axi-cel in the CD19 H-score low (≤median) subgroup might be dependent on low/suboptimal target expression and/or concurrent immunosuppressive environment
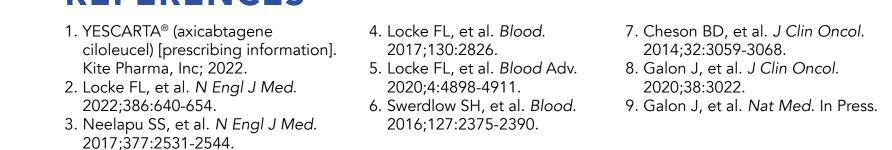
CONCLUSIONS

Figure 8. Key Prognostic Markers in 2L LBCL in ZUMA-7

[a] Tumor burden, LDH and GCB subgroup did not impact outcomes in the axi-cel arm. [b] CD19 expression did not impact outcomes in the SOC arm.
Axi-cel, axicabtagene ciloleucel; EFS, event-free survival; GCB, germinal center B-cell–like; LDH, lactate dehydrogenase; SOC, standard of care; SPD, sum of product diameters.

- In 2L LBCL, axi-cel was superior to SOC across common prognostic subgroups, including higher tumor burden and LDH, and non-GCB status (Figure 8)
  - High tumor burden, elevated LDH, and non-GCB status were associated with poorer responses to SOC, but did not impact responses to axi-cel in ZUMA-7
- Markers of T-cell function and trafficking (gene expression signatures, IS15 and IS21) might decrease through lines of therapy as disease progresses, supporting earlier axi-cel intervention due to a more favorable immune contexture (higher T-cell signature in TME in 2L compared with third-line)
  - Responses to axi-cel were substantial and superior to SOC for both high and low CD19 expression
  - Lower CD19 protein expression (H-score) overlapped with a more complex/immune-infiltrated TME, possibly enriched with a number of immunosuppressive features
- Axi-cel showed improved EFS versus SOC irrespective of B-cell lineage signature strength or level of CD19 protein or mRNA expression
- Axi-cel intervention in 2L is supported by a favorable immune contexture and efficacy superior to SOC, including for patients with high tumor burden and elevated LDH

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