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Ramos-Remus, Cesar

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Latitude gradient influences the age of onset of rheumatoid arthritis: a worldwide survey

GEO-RA Group

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Abstract The age of onset of rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is an important outcome predictor. Northern countries report an age of RA onset of around 50 years, but apparently, variability exists across different geographical regions. The objective of the present study is to assess whether the age of onset of RA varies across latitudes worldwide. In a proof-of-concept cross-sectional worldwide survey, rheumatologists from preselected cities interviewed 20 consecutive RA patients regarding the date of RA onset (RAO, when the patient first noted a swollen joint). Other studied variables included location of each city, rheumatologist settings, latitudes (10° increments, south to north), longitudes (three regions), intracountry consistency, and countries' Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI). Data from 2481 patients (82% females) were obtained from 126 rheumatologists in 77 cities of 41 countries. Worldwide mean age of RAO was 44 ± 14 years (95% CI 44–45). In 28% of patients, RA began before age 36 years and before age 46 years in 50% of patients. RAO was 8 years earlier around the Tropic of Cancer when compared with northern latitudes ($p < 0.001$, 95% CI 3.5–13). Multivariate analysis showed that females, western cities, and latitudes around the Tropic of Cancer are associated with younger age of RAO (R^2 0.045, $p < 0.001$). A positive correlation was found between the age of RAO and IHDI ($r = 0.7$, $p < 0.01$, R^2 0.5). RA often begins at an early age and onset varies across latitudes worldwide. We postulate that countries'

developmental status and their geographical and geomagnetic location influence the age of RAO.

Keywords Age of onset · Environmental · Geoepidemiology · Inequality · Pollution · Rheumatoid arthritis

Introduction

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a disease of unknown cause and variable clinical presentation. Its prevalence and incidence vary across populations [1–3] and time [4–6]. Patients with RA may have a variable course, and their response to treatment is oftentimes unpredictable. Because of this variability, RA has been described as one of modern medicine's greatest enigmas [7].

The complete etiologic picture of this disease remains unclear because the genetic contribution to RA has been estimated to be 12–60% [8, 9], and environmental factors contribute to up to half of the variation in disease susceptibility [10]. Variations in the reported figures on genetic and environmental factors across populations can be partially explained by differences in study design, the time when studies were performed, and that the data often come from historical studies that are restricted to specific regions or ethnic groups. Nevertheless, it is recognized that there are differences in the rates of occurrence of RA between countries and areas of the world [3].

The age of RA onset (RAO) is recognized as one of the most important predictors of disease outcome [11]. When RA starts at an early age, the economic burden imposed upon the patient, their family, and health services may be devastating. However, variability in the age of RAO is often neglected in studies of RA patterns. Some reports involving patients of

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✉ GEO-RA Group
geo.ragroupstudy@gmail.com;

¹ Unidad de Investigacion en Enfermedades Cronico-Degenerativas, Guadalajara, Mexico

European descent from developed countries found that the mean age of RAO is around 50 years [2, 12–14] with epidemiologic studies from these countries consistently reporting incidence rates that increase with age into the 70s [1]. Conversely, some studies from African and Asian countries have observed a significantly earlier peak in the mean age of RAO, which can be as young as the 20s or 30s [1]. Significant variations in the age of RAO have been reported in regional studies at different latitude gradients, both in terms of the mean age of onset and the frequency distribution by age groups [15, 16].

Latitude gradients have been used in geoepidemiology as a surrogate to study the influence of environment on disease incidence and risks across different geographic areas, so as to generate hypotheses for further investigation [17]. For example, diseases such as systemic lupus erythematosus, dermatomyositis, and Crohn's disease are geographically associated with northern latitudes [17].

The objective of this proof-of-concept cross-sectional survey was to assess whether the age of RAO varies across latitudes worldwide.

Subjects and methods

In a proof-of-concept survey, rheumatologists working at preselected cities around the world interviewed consecutive RA patients regarding their disease onset. Major cities were selected by 15° quadrants (latitude and longitude) worldwide. Rheumatologist contact information for these cities was obtained using regional or local rheumatology association open databases, the web site of the US National Library of Medicine (PubMed), and direct recommendation from selected rheumatologists. An individualized invitation letter, which included information about the study but not its hypothesis, was sent electronically to each identified rheumatologist. A reply confirming the rheumatologists' interest in participating and confirmation of whether they treated RA patients and were board certified in rheumatology, the type of clinical practice (private, university, or other), and the city and country where the rheumatologist worked was requested. No compensation was offered. A second electronic communication, with detailed instructions that included guidelines on how to gather patient information in the data log sheet format, was sent to rheumatologists who agreed to participate. Participants were to provide data by directly interviewing 20 consecutive RA patients as per the 1987 criteria of the American Rheumatism Association [18]. This information was limited to nonsensitive data, in compliance with local regulations, and included nontraceable patient identification (e.g., consecutive numbers, letters, or initials), date

of birth (month and year), sex, date of RA diagnosis (month and year), and date of RAO, defined as the month and year when the patient first noticed a swollen joint.

Data from data log sheets were extracted by two medical students, and the precise latitude and longitude of each city were obtained using Google Earth (Google Inc., Mountain View, CA, USA). For cases in which the data log sheet included errors or inconsistencies for up to three patients, the participating rheumatologist was asked to review the data. If there were four or more patients with inconsistent data or submitted data from less than 18 patients, the complete set was excluded; no substitutions were allowed. Summary data and manuscript drafts were shared with all participants.

Statistical analysis

Data handling was based on the following assumptions: (a) rheumatologists would have easy access to 20 RA patients in their clinical practice over a short period of time, to assure their compliance; (b) comparing data from two or more rheumatologists in the same city would allow us to assess the intracity consistency of the main variable (age of RAO) using nonparametric Mann–Whitney *U* or Kruskal–Wallis tests; and (c) comparing data from two or more cities located at the same latitude in each country would allow us to assess intracountry consistency of the main variable using parametric tests (Student's *t* test or one-way ANOVA). The age of RAO was examined as both a continuous variable and a categorical variable (age groups, 10-year increments).

Differences in age of RAO according to latitudes worldwide (10° increments, south to north) were examined using one-way ANOVA for continuous variables (with a post hoc Schaffé for multiple comparisons), whereas a Pearson's chi-square or Fisher's exact test was used for categorical variables. Thereafter, the world map was arbitrarily divided by longitudes into three regions: region 1 (30° W to 134° W) that includes countries of the Americas; region 2 (29° W to 104° E) that includes countries of Europe, Africa, and Western Asia; and region 3 (105° E to 180° E) that includes countries of East Asia and Oceania. This division was made to assess whether significant differences in the age of RAO, detected according to latitudes worldwide, persisted by region (using one-way ANOVA and Pearson's chi-square or Fisher's exact test). A *p* of ≤0.05 was set as the level of statistical significance, and confidence intervals were reported at 95% (95% CI).

Stepwise multiple linear regression analysis was performed to assess the effects of sex (binary), northern cities (binary), western cities (binary, from the Greenwich parallel), cities

grouped per longitude (categorical variable, three regions), and cities grouped per latitude code (categorical variable, each 10°) on age of RAO. A backward regression was run for all significant variables ($p < 0.1$) identified by univariate analysis.

After reviewing the results, a post hoc analysis was performed to explore whether the age of RAO is correlated with the developmental status of participating countries (Pearson's correlation coefficient). The countries' developmental status was obtained from the United Nations Development Programme report [19] on the 2015 Human Development Index (HDI) (years 2010–2014) and on the Inequality-adjusted HDI (year 2014).

This being a nonintervention study, and the collected information precludes individual patient identification (nonsensitive data), no informed consent was required as per local regulations at each site.

Results

Figure 1 shows the distribution of rheumatologists invited to participate and those who accepted our invitation. Figure 2

Fig. 1 Flow chart of study participants (rheumatologists, countries, and cities)

shows the distribution of the mean age of RAO by participating country, with the number of sites (rheumatologists) and cities per country. We obtained data of 2481 patients (82% females) from 126 rheumatologists in 77 cities of 41 countries.

Table 1 shows the mean age of RAO and the frequency distribution by age group according to latitude in 10° intervals from south to north. The worldwide overall mean age of RAO was 44.4 ± 14 years (95% CI 44–45). The overall frequency distribution by age group shows that 28% of patients had an RAO before the age of 36 years and between the ages of 16 and 45 years in 50% of patients. Analysis of age of RAO by latitude showed significant differences in both, as mean and as distribution by age groups. Age of RAO for latitude code 8 (20° N to 29° N) was on average 8, 8, 5, and 6 years younger when compared with latitude codes 11, 10, 3, and 2, respectively ($p < 0.001$, 95% CI for differences of 3.5–13, 2–13, 0.1–10, and 2–10 years, respectively). Latitude codes 8 and 9 (around the Tropic of Cancer) had a higher proportion of patients with an RAO before age 35 years compared with northern or southern latitudes ($p < 0.001$). Intracity variability could be assessed in 29 (38%) cities, and consistency was confirmed in 79% of them (supplementary Table 1). Intracountry variability could be assessed for 19 (46%) countries, and consistency was ascertained in 16 (84%) (supplementary Table 2).

The results of subanalysis by region (longitudes) are shown in Table 2 as the mean age of RAO and in Table 3 as the frequency distribution by age group, both by latitude in 10° intervals south to north. Similar trends were observed in region 1 (the Americas), where 12 countries participated and provided data on a total of 1062 patients. No rheumatologists from the USA replied to our electronic communications. The overall mean age of RAO was 44 ± 14 years (95% CI 43–45). Disease onset was on average 8 and 14.5 years younger for latitude code 8 compared with northern latitude codes 11 and 10, respectively ($p < 0.01$), and 7 years younger than southern latitude code 2 (31°–40° S) ($p = 0.01$). The frequency distribution by age group showed that in latitude code 8, nearly half of patients had RAO before the age of 36 years, which was significantly different when compared with latitude codes 2 (24.8%) and 6 (27.8%) ($p < 0.001$). In region 2 (Europe, Africa, and Western Asia), 24 countries participated, yielding data on 1126 total patients. The overall mean age of RAO was 44 ± 14 years (95% CI 43–45). For latitude code 8, RAO was on average 8.5 and 7.5 years younger when compared with northern latitude codes 11 and 10, respectively ($p < 0.01$). For latitude codes 8 and 9, there were a significantly higher proportion of patients with RAO before age 36 years compared with latitudes 10 and 11 ($p = 0.01$). However, there is no land in latitude code 1 (>40° S). In addition, in latitude code 4 (11° S–

Fig. 2 Mean age of onset of rheumatoid arthritis distributed by participating country, number of cities (C), number of sites (S) (rheumatologists), and number of patients (P)

20° S), we were unable to contact rheumatologists in Senegal, Guinea, Niger, Ethiopia, and Sudan. The number of patients varied per country, yielding a broad 95%

CI for latitude codes 3 and 5. In region 3 (East Asia and Oceania), five countries participated and provided data on 293 patients. We were unable to contact

Table 1 Worldwide distribution of mean age of onset of rheumatoid arthritis (RA) and frequency distribution by age group per every 10° of latitude, south to north

Latitude, code (location)	Patients N=	Age of onset of RA, mean ± SD (years) (95% CI)	Age groups (years) n (%)**					
			16–25	26–35	36–45	46–55	56–65	>65
1 (>40° S)	96	45 ± 14 (42.5 to 48)	4 (4.2%)	22 (22.9%)	23 (24%)	23 (24%)	13 (13.5%)	11 (11.5%)
2 (31° to 40° S)	473	46 ± 14 (44 to 47)	32 (6.8%)	80 (16.9%)	125 (26.4%)	113 (23.9%)	84 (17.8%)	39 (8.2%)
3 (21° to 30° S)	213	45 ± 14 (43 to 47)	19 (8.9%)	32 (15%)	50 (23.5%)	58 (27.2%)	37 (17.4%)	17 (8%)
4 (11° to 20° S)	80	45 ± 14.5 (41.5 to 48)	8 (10%)	14 (17.5%)	16 (20%)	22 (27.5%)	12 (15%)	8 (10%)
5 (1° to 10° S)	138	43 ± 13 (41 to 45)	15 (10.9%)	24 (17.4%)	34 (24.6%)	40 (29%)	19 (13.8%)	6 (4.3%)
6 (0° to 9° N)	158	44 ± 15 (42 to 46.5)	21 (13.3%)	20 (12.7%)	40 (25.3%)	41 (25.9%)	24 (15.2%)	12 (7.6%)
7 (10° to 19° N)	316	44 ± 13 (42 to 45)	33 (10.4%)	54 (17.1%)	61 (19.3%)	107 (33.9%)	49 (15.5%)	12 (3.8%)
8 (20° to 29° N)	389	40 ± 12* (39 to 41)	41 (10.5%)	105 (27%)	104 (26.7%)	99 (25.4%)	29 (7.5%)	11 (2.8%)
9 (30° to 39° N)	193	43 ± 15 (41 to 45)	18 (9.3%)	48 (24.9%)	43 (22.3%)	46 (23.8%)	22 (11.4%)	16 (8.3%)
10 (40° to 49° N)	153	48 ± 14 (45 to 50)	6 (3.9%)	31 (20.3%)	30 (19.6%)	37 (24.2%)	30 (19.6%)	19 (12.4%)
11 (>50° N)	272	48 ± 15 (46 to 50)	18 (6.6%)	44 (16.2%)	52 (19.1%)	55 (20.2%)	63 (23.2%)	40 (14.7%)
Total	2481	44 ± 14 (44 to 45)	215 (8.7%)	474 (19.1%)	578 (23.3%)	641 (25.8%)	382 (15.4%)	191 (7.7%)

*Latitude code 8 is significantly different compared with latitude codes 2, 3, 10, and 11; $p < 0.001$

**Significant differences of age groups by latitudes, $p < 0.001$

Table 2 Mean age of onset of rheumatoid arthritis (RA) by region (longitude), according to latitude

Regions by longitudes (longitude range) and participating countries						
Region 1 (30° W to 134° W)			Region 2 (29° W to 104° E)		Region 3 (105° E to 180° E)	
Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Venezuela			Burkina Faso, Finland, France, Kenya, Netherlands, Nigeria, Norway, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Ghana, Russia, Egypt, Algeria, Germany, Switzerland, Qatar, Bangladesh, Iran, Singapore, Thailand, India, Nepal		China, Japan, New Zealand, Philippines, Australia	
Latitude (range)	Patients <i>N</i> =	RA age of onset Mean ± SD (95% CI)	Patients <i>N</i> =	RA Age of onset Mean ± SD (95% CI)	Patients <i>N</i> =	RA age of onset Mean ± SD (95% CI)
1 (>40° S)	57	41 ± 13 (38 to 44.5)	–	–	39	51.5 ± 14 47 to 56
2 (31°–40° S)	339	45 ± 14 (44 to 47)	57	46 ± 12 43 to 49	77	46.5 ± 14 43 to 50
3 (21°–30° S)	156	44 ± 13 (42 to 46)	38	43 ± 13 39 to 48	19	57 ± 11 51 to 62
4 (11°–20° S)	80	45 ± 14.5 (41.5 to 48)	–	–	–	–
5 (1°–10° S)	118	44 ± 13 (41 to 46)	20	37.5 ± 11 32 to 43	–	–
6 (0°–9° N)	79	44 ± 14 (41 to 47)	79	44 ± 15 41 to 48	–	–
7 (10°–19° N)	98	41 ± 13 (38 to 43)	139	44 ± 13 42 to 46.5	79	47 ± 14 44 to 50
8 (20°–29° N)	76	38 ± 11.5 (35 to 40)	274	39.5 ± 12 38 to 41	39	46 ± 13 42 to 50.5
9 (30°–39° N)	–	–	153	42 ± 15 40 to 44.5	40	47 ± 14 42 to 51
10 (40°–49° N)	20	52.5 ± 16 (45 to 60)	133	47 ± 14 45 to 49	–	–
11 (>50° N)	39	46 ± 15 (41 to 51)	233	48 ± 15 46 to 50	–	–
Total	1062	44 ± 14 (43 to 45)	1126	44 ± 14 43 to 45	293	48 ± 14 46 to 49.5

rheumatologists in latitudes 4 to 6 (the Republic of Indonesia and Papua New Guinea) or latitudes 10 and 11 (the Kuril Islands and the Kamchatka Peninsula). No significant differences were found in this region for mean age of RAO and frequency distribution by age group, probably incurring in a type II error.

The final model in the stepwise multiple linear regression analysis included sex, latitude coded groups, and western cities. A significant regression equation was found ($F(12, 2468) = 9.72$, $p < 0.001$), with an R^2 of 0.045. The age of RAO was significantly younger among females and patients from western cities; age of RAO was older at northern latitudes (>50° N) (Table 4). We did not find significant differences between other variables, such as rheumatologist practice type or the number of years in rheumatology practice.

Post hoc analysis showed a positive correlation ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.0001$) between the age of RAO and HDI by country for

the years 2010 to 2014, with a coefficient of determination (R^2) of 0.33. When the HDI was adjusted for inequality (year 2014), the positive correlation became stronger ($r = 0.71$, $p < 0.01$), with an R^2 of 0.50.

Discussion

Despite the importance of age of RAO as an outcome predictor, data on its variability in different populations are scarce and limited to specific geographical regions. In this proof-of-concept study, the age of RAO was evaluated in different regions of the world and its variability was analyzed per latitude gradients, as these are used as surrogates of environmental factors to posit hypotheses for further study.

Table 3 Frequency distribution of age groups for onset of rheumatoid arthritis by region (longitude), according to latitude

	Latitude codes ^a										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Longitudes											
Region 1 (30° W to 134° W)											
Age groups, <i>n</i> (%)^b											
16–25 years	4 (7)	24 (7)	15 (10)	8 (10)	12 (10)	8 (10)	12 (12)	9 (12)	–	1 (5)	3 (8)
26–35 years	18 (32)	60 (18)	25 (16)	14 (17.5)	19 (16)	14 (18)	23 (23.5)	25 (33)	–	3 (15)	7 (18)
36–45 years	12 (21)	85 (25)	39 (25)	16 (20)	27 (23)	21 (27)	23 (23.5)	20 (26)	–	2 (10)	9 (23)
46–55 years	13 (23)	79 (23)	40 (26)	22 (27.5)	36 (30.5)	19 (24)	29 (30)	16 (21)	–	5 (25)	6 (15)
56–65 years	8 (14)	64 (19)	27 (17)	12 (15)	18 (15)	12 (15)	6 (6)	5 (7)	–	5 (25)	10 (26)
>65 years	2 (3.5)	27 (8)	10 (6)	8 (10)	6 (5)	5 (6)	5 (5)	1 (1)	–	4 (20)	4 (10)
Total	57	339	156	80	118	79	98	76	–	20	39
Region 2 (29° W to 104° E)											
Age groups, <i>n</i> (%)^b											
16–25 years	–	4 (7)	4 (10.5)	–	3 (15)	13 (16.5)	14 (10)	31 (11)	16 (10.5)	5 (4)	15 (6)
26–35 years	–	5 (9)	7 (18)	–	5 (25)	6 (8)	20 (14)	71 (26)	41 (27)	28 (21)	37 (16)
36–45 years	–	19 (33)	8 (21)	–	7 (35)	19 (24)	27 (19)	78 (28.5)	32 (21)	28 (21)	43 (18.5)
46–55 years	–	19 (33)	12 (32)	–	4 (20)	22 (28)	51 (37)	70 (25.5)	37 (24)	32 (24)	49 (21)
56–65 years	–	7 (12)	6 (16)	–	1 (5)	12 (15)	24 (17)	18 (7)	14 (9)	25 (19)	53 (23)
>65 years	–	3 (5)	1 (3)	–	0 (0)	7 (9)	3 (2)	6 (2)	13 (8.5)	15 (11)	36 (15.5)
Total	–	57	38	–	20	79	139	274	153	133	233
Region 3 (105° E to 180° E)											
Age groups, <i>n</i> (%)^b											
16–25 years	0 (0)	4 (5)	0 (0)	–	–	–	7 (9)	1 (3)	2 (5)	–	–
26–35 years	4 (10)	15 (19.5)	0 (0)	–	–	–	11 (14)	9 (23)	7 (17.5)	–	–
36–45 years	11 (28)	21 (27)	3 (16)	–	–	–	11 (14)	6 (15)	11 (27.5)	–	–
46–55 years	10 (26)	15 (19.5)	6 (32)	–	–	–	27 (34)	13 (33)	9 (22.5)	–	–
56–65 years	5 (13)	13 (17)	4 (21)	–	–	–	19 (24)	6 (15)	8 (20)	–	–
>65 years	9 (23)	9 (12)	6 (32)	–	–	–	4 (5)	4 (10)	3 (7.5)	–	–
Total	39	77	19	–	–	–	79	39	40	–	–

^a Latitude codes: 1 = >40° S; 2 = 31° S–40° S; 3 = 21° S–30° S; 4 = 11° S–20° S; 5 = 1° S–10° S; 6 = 0°–9° N; 7 = 10° N–19° N; 8 = 20° N–29° N; 9 = 30° N–39° N; 10 = 40° N–49° N; and 11 = >50° N

^b Rounded numbers

Our first important finding is that, in general, RA is not a disease of older adulthood. Based on the sample size of 2481 patients from 41 countries and the narrow 95% CI of the mean, we believe that our data are quite robust. The fact that half of RA patients worldwide have disease onset at a young age has several implications. First, RA may have a greater individual and familial impact than previously believed because its onset is before individuals reach their peak life roles. Second, the general perception that RA occurs mainly in older adulthood, which is based on older data from developed northern countries [1], may mislead local policy makers when allocating resources and developing health care strategies for a disease that can last as long as 40 years in many cases. Third, it is possible that the age of RAO

has changed over the past five decades, together with temporal trends in the occurrence of RA [1, 4–6, 20–23].

Our second finding is that the age of RAO is significantly different along latitude gradients. We have shown that at latitudes around the Tropic of Cancer (latitude codes 8 and 9), RA starts at a younger age, with a higher proportion of patients developing the disease before age 36 years as compared with northern and southern latitudes. When analyzed by region (longitudes), similar trends were observed for region 1. Region 2 also showed significant trends, but the data are not as robust as for the Americas. Region 3 lacked data at several latitudes, and the broad 95% CI observed for the available data indicates a possible type II error. However, multiple linear regression models showed that RA starts at a significantly

Table 4 Stepwise linear regression, variables associated with age of onset of rheumatoid arthritis

Variable	Univariable β coefficient 95% CI)	<i>p</i> value	Multivariable β coefficient (95% CI)	<i>p</i> value
Sex (female)	−4.4 (−5.8; −2.9)	<0.01	−3.9 (−5.4; −2.6)	<0.01
Latitude code ^a				
1 (>40° S)	−2.7 (−5.9; 0.5)	0.09	−1.4 (−4.7; 1.8)	0.37
2 (31° to 40° S)	−2.3 (−4.4; −0.3)	0.02	−0.9 (−3.1; 1.3)	0.42
3 (21° to 30° S)	−2.9 (−5.5; −0.5)	0.02	−1.5 (−4.1; 1.1)	0.25
4 (11° to 20° S)	−3.3 (−6.7; 0.1)	0.05	−1.2 (−4.7; 2.4)	0.53
5 (1° to 10° S)	−5.1 (−7.9; −2.2)	<0.01	−3.2 (−6.2; −0.3)	0.03
6 (0° to 9° N)	−3.8 (−6.5; −1.1)	<0.01	−2.4 (−5.2; 0.3)	0.08
7 (10° to 19° N)	−4.2 (−6.4; −1.9)	<0.01	−3.3 (−5.5; −1.0)	<0.01
8 (20° to 29° N)	−8.2 (−10.3; −6.0)	<0.01	−7.6 (−9.7; −5.4)	<0.01
9 (30° to 39° N)	−4.9 (−7.5; −2.4)	<0.01	−4.3 (−6.8; −1.8)	<0.01
10 (40° to 49° N)	−0.4 (−3.2; 2.3)	0.8	−0.0 (−2.7; 2.7)	0.99
Cities above the equator	−1.1 (−2.3; −0.02)	0.04	*	
Longitude regions ^b				
Europe, Africa, West Asia ^c	1.9 (0.1; 3.6)	0.04	**	
Americas (30° W to 134° W)	−1.6 (−3.2; 0.07)	0.06	**	
Western cities ^d	−0.9 (−2.0; 0.2)	0.10	−1.6 (−2.9 ; −0.3)	0.01

^a Group 11 (>50° N) is the referent group^b East Asia, Australia, and New Zealand (105° E to 180° E) is the referent group^c Europe, Africa, Western Asia; 29° W to 104° E^d Starting from the Greenwich parallel

*Nonsignificant in the second step

**Nonsignificant in the third step

younger age among females; in patients from latitude codes 5, 7, 8, and 9; and in those from countries in the Western Hemisphere (west of the Greenwich parallel).

Although we found no similar reports with which to compare our results, these are in concert with other studies conducted at regional level. In 2007, our group reported that the mean age of RAO was significantly younger among Mexicans than among Canadians [15], with figures similar to those reported here. Abdel-Nasser et al. [1] reported that Egyptian patients, especially women, had a significantly younger age of RAO than Dutch patients. Studies from India and Pakistan have a higher RA prevalence in the age groups of 25–29 years [24] and 16–29 years [25], respectively. Studies from the USA have found that the incidence of RA varies by geographic coordinates [26, 27].

Therefore, it seems plausible that latitude gradients play a major role in triggering those mechanisms responsible for RA initiation among genetically predisposed subjects. We posit that this happens because of two characteristics that are shared among countries located near the Tropic of Cancer, which may differentiate them from nations at northern latitudes: the developmental status of these countries (developing countries

around the Tropic of Cancer versus developed northern nations) and the latitude gradient per se.

Post hoc analysis showed a significant relationship between the age of RAO and countries' HDI, which became even stronger when adjusted for inequality. Developmental status takes into account life expectancy, education, per capita income, and inequality. These variables can in turn act as surrogates for population health, lifestyle, environmental pollutants, and exposure to infections. Therefore, air pollution, local environmental policies, social inequalities, the age of exposure to infections and how they are treated, changes in the microbiome because of infection or seasonal variation in diet [28], oral contraceptive use, age at first pregnancy, and breastfeeding practices may be related to differences between developing and developed countries. For instance, air pollution—a mixture of suspended particulate matter mainly from vehicular traffic, industry, stationary fuel burners, and solid fuel combustion—has recently been found to be associated with RA [29]. A study in Sweden found that the risk of developing RA was increased with exposure to gaseous pollutants (NO₂ and SO₂) in the 10th year before disease onset [30]. Lower socioeconomic status has been associated with RA [31], and there is an increased risk of exposure to atmospheric

pollution and greater smoking consumption compared with individuals at higher income levels [32, 33]. A variable also to consider is oral contraceptive use, which may delay the onset of RA [34] and have a protective effect [35]. Use of oral contraceptives is less common at an early age in developing countries than in developed ones [36]. Having more than one pregnancy, young age at first pregnancy, and breastfeeding patterns are other possible factors [37–39]. A delay in the age of RAO in developed countries may be related to an increased tendency to postpone first pregnancies or a tendency not to breastfeed [40]. Exposure to infections may have a dual effect on the initiation of RA in susceptible individuals. Some infections may produce a protective effect [41, 42], whereas others, such as periodontal disease, may increase the risk of triggering RA [31]. Hence, exposure to specific infectious agents and how they are treated, with consequent changes in the microbiome [43], may be related to socioeconomic status, health care characteristics, and inequality, which may in turn be related to a country's developmental status.

Several of these variables can be modified by non-medical means that depend more on public health measures than on pharmacologic interventions. If our hypothesis is correct, the age of RAO could be modified to affect fewer years in the lives of RA patients from developing countries, analogous to the decline in infectious diseases during the 19th and 20th centuries before the extended use of antibiotics, thereby reducing disease burden and health care costs [44].

The second characteristic that differentiates countries around the Tropic of Cancer from those at northern latitudes is the gradient of latitudes where countries are located. The incidence and periodicity of RA have been found to be related to increasing geographic latitudes, which determine the magnitude of exposure to variables such as solar cycles, auroral electrojets, extreme ultraviolet radiation, substorms, and magnetic field perturbations [45]. Unfortunately, these variables have only been studied in limited geographic areas over short time spans. Future studies with larger data sets that cover several countries and organized by geomagnetic and geographic coordinates would be necessary, to assess the biologic disturbance and magnitude that these variables may cause [46] on the incidence and age of RAO.

We chose a proof-of-concept study for feasibility reasons; however, this design has inherent limitations such as the fact that chance (random), bias, and confounders cannot be controlled. Our approach to decrease issues of RA ascertainment and selection bias included the recruitment of rheumatologists listed in rheumatology association registers as well as their self-reporting of board certification and that they had patients with RA under their care. Instructions for determining patient age of RAO were clearly stated, and participants were not informed of the primary aim of the study at the time of data collection. The wide standard deviation in the mean age of RAO observed in

each data set suggests that participants maintained a typical rheumatology practice. Unfortunately, it was possible to assess intracity consistency in only one third of participating cities, and inconsistencies were found in some of them. Chance is the most viable explanation based on the small sample of patients that we requested of each rheumatologist, the broad 95% CI of each data set, and the nonsignificance of other variables such as length or type of practice.

Intracountry consistency could be assessed for nearly half of participating countries, but some significant differences were observed. We retrieved the mean age of RAO reported in other studies (referent studies), to gain some insight into how much of our data from these countries are different from those reported previously, although the definitions of age of onset in these referent studies were different from ours. Mean ages of RAO in referent studies from Brazil (44.9 ± 14.5 years) [47] and Australia (49.6 ± 11 years) [48] were similar to our data from these countries; we did not find any published data from Ecuador. However, the main limitation of our study lies in the 11 (27%) countries where only one rheumatologist participated. Referent studies from Switzerland (mean age of RAO 51.5 years) [49], Japan (49 years) [50], Kenya (41 ± 17 years) [51], Nigeria (42 years) [52], Sweden (58 ± 18 years) [14], Russia (53 years) [53], Colombia (44 ± 12 years) [54], Burkina Faso (35 years) [55], and Iran (41 ± 13 years) [56] reported figures similar to ours. We did not find referent studies from Ghana or Panama.

In summary, RA often begins at an early age and its onset varies across latitudes throughout the world. From this observation, it can be hypothesized that countries' developmental status and location influence the age of RAO. These features warrant further studies on the precise magnitude of this phenomenon and the possible causality of diverse factors such as pollution, pregnancy-related patterns, and infection exposures, all adjusted for inequality, as well as atmospheric variables adjusted by geographical and geomagnetic coordinates.

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The members of the GEO-RA Group are as follows:

Universidad Autonoma de Guadalajara, Guadalajara, Mexico
Cesar Ramos-Remus

Unidad de Investigacion en Enfermedades Cronico-Degenerativas, Guadalajara, Mexico
Aldo Barajas-Ochoa
Andrea Ramirez-Gomez
Jose D. Castillo-Ortiz
Victor Brambila-Barba

Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK
Adewale O. Adebajo

LSU Health Sciences Center, New Orleans, USA

Luis R. Espinoza

Hospital General Regional 46, Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social, Guadalajara, Mexico

Francisco J. Aceves-Avila

Secretaria de Salud Jalisco, Guadalajara, Mexico

Jorge M. Sánchez-González

Dr. Benbadis University Hospital, Constantine, Algeria

Nadia Boudersa

University of Batna 2, Batna, Algeria

Samy Slimani

Ben Aknoun Hospital, University of Algiers, Algiers, Algeria

Aicha Ladjouze-Rezig

Centro Traumatológico Bariloche, Bariloche, Argentina

Mónica P. Diaz

Sanatorio San Carlos, Bariloche, Argentina

Karin I. Kirmayr

Hospital Alemán, Buenos Aires, Argentina

Cecilia A. Asnal

Hospital Italiano de Buenos Aires, Instituto Universitario, Escuela de Medicina Hospital Italiano de Buenos Aires y Fundación Dr. Pedro M. Catoggio para el Progreso de la Reumatología, Buenos Aires, Argentina

Luis J. Catoggio

Instituto de Rehabilitación Psicosfísica, Buenos Aires, Argentina

Gustavo Citera

Hospital Militar Central, Buenos Aires, Argentina

Gustavo C. Casado

Hospital Penna, Buenos Aires, Argentina

Analia P. Alvarez

Departamento de Medicina Interna, CEMIC, Buenos Aires, Argentina

Cecilia N. Pisoni

Hospital Distrito Sanitario N 8: Eva Perón, Formosa, Argentina

Emilio Benavente

Centro Fleboestético del Sur, General Roca, Argentina

Adriana Lopez-Cabanillas

Hospital Zonal General Roca, General Roca, Argentina

Roberto M. Baez

Instituto Cardiovascular de Rosario, Rosario, Argentina

Bernardo A. Pons-Estel

Hospital Provincial de Rosario, Rosario, Argentina

Mónica P. Sacnún

Sección de Reumatología y Enfermedades Autoinmunes, Hospital JB Iturraspe, Santa Fe, Argentina

Javier A. Cavallasca

Centro Privado de Rehabilitación, Santa Rosa, Argentina

Raúl H. Paniego

Royal Adelaide Hospital and Discipline of Medicine, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia

Susanna M. Proudman

The University of Queensland Diamantina Institute, Princess Alexandra Hospital, Brisbane, Australia

Ranjeny Thomas

Bone & Joint Institute Royal New Castle Centre and University of Newcastle, Newcastle, Australia

Gabor Major

Georgetown Arthritis, Newcastle, Australia

David M. Mathers

Department of Rheumatology, Royal North Shore Hospital, Institute of Bone and Joint Research, Kolling Institute, Sydney, Australia

Leslie Schrieber

Department of Rheumatology, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU), Dhaka, Bangladesh

Nazrul Islam

Syed A. Haq

Rheumatology Division, University Hospital Brussels and Free University Brussels, Brussels, Belgium

Patrick H. Dessein

Rheuma Clinic and Brazilian Society of Autoimmunity, Porto Alegre, Brazil

Carlos A. von Muhlen

Postgraduate School-Pontifica Universidade Católica, and Rheumatology Department at Santa Casa da Misericórdia do Rio de Janeiro General Hospital, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Washington A. Bianchi

Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Geraldo da R. Castelar-Pinheiro

Escola Paulista de Medicina, Universidade Federal De Sao Paulo, Sao Paulo, Brazil

Daniel Feldman-Pollak

Rheumatology Division, School of Medicine of Jundiai, Sao Paulo, Brazil

Waldenise Cossermelli

Hospital das Clinicas-Faculdade de Medicina da Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil

Karina R. Bonfiglioli

Serviço de Reumatologia, Hospital do Servidor Público Estadual Francisco Morato de Oliveira (HSPE-FMO), São Paulo, Brasil

Rina D. Giorgi

Centre Hospitalier Universitaire Yalgado Ouédraogo, University of Ouagadougou, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso

Wendlassida J. Zabsonre-Tiendrebeogo

University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada

Anthony S. Russell

Lilia Olaru

Ottawa Hospital, Ottawa, Canada

Jacob Karsh

University of Concepción, Concepción, Chile

Irene H. Castro-Esparza

Hospital Clínico San Borja Arriarán, Santiago, Chile

Carlos Fuentealba

Clínica Indisa, Universidad de Chile, Santiago, Chile

Sergio Aguilera

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago, Chile

Paula I. Burgos

Hospital del Salvador, Facultad de Medicina Universidad de Chile, and Clínica Alemana, Facultad de Medicina Clínica Alemana-UDD, Santiago, Chile

Oscar Neira

Department of Rheumatology and Immunology, Beijing University Medical School People's Hospital, Beijing, China
Zhan-guo Li

Department of Medicine & Therapeutics, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China
Lai-Shan Tam

Department of Biomedical Sciences, the City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China
Mo Y. Mok

Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá, Colombia
Yimy F. Medina

Hospital Luis Vernaza, Guayaquil, Ecuador
Andrés E. Zúñiga-Vera
Mario J. Moreno-Alvarez

Universidad Católica de Guayaquil, Guayaquil, Ecuador
Claudia Vera

Hospital de Especialidades Eugenio Espejo, Quito, Ecuador
Ivonne Quezada

Clínica Santa Lucia, Quito, Ecuador
Iván M. Moreno

Centro de Atención Ambulatoria El Batán (IESS), Quito, Ecuador
Wendy Calapaqui

Rheumatology Unit, Cairo University Hospitals, Cairo, Egypt
Ghada El-Mardenly

Department of Medicine, Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt
M. Salah Salama

Rheumatology and Immunology Unit, Department of Internal Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt
Gaafar Ragab
Kamel Gado

Rheumatology Center, Cairo, Egypt
Tahsin Hadidi

Department of Rheumatology, Helsinki University Hospital and University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland
Marjatta Leirisalo-Repo
Riitta Tuompo

Kanta-Häme Hospital, Riihimäki, Finland
Riitta Koivuniemi

INSERM UMR-S938, Faculty of Medicine Pierre & Marie Curie Paris VI, Paris, France, and Department of Rheumatology, Saint-Antoine Hospital, AP-HP, Paris, France
Francis Berenbaum

Rheumatology A Department, Cochin Hospital, Paris Descartes University, Paris, France
Yannick Allanore

Centre de Rhumatologie, Hôpital Purpan, and Université Paul Sabatier Toulouse III, Toulouse, France
Arnaud Constantin

Department of Rheumatology and Clinical Immunology, Charité University Medicine Berlin (CCM), Berlin, Germany
Frank Buttgereit

Division of Rheumatology and Clinical Immunology, Medizinische Klinik und Poliklinik IV, Ludwig Maximilians University, Munich, Germany
Hendrik Schulze-Koops
Myriam Liz

School of Medicine and Dentistry, University of Ghana, Accra, Ghana
Dzifa Dey

Instituto Hondureño de Seguridad Social, Tegucigalpa, Honduras
Carlos B. Santiago-Pastelín
Hugo D. Alonzo-Borjas
Victor Cuéllar-Cruz

Institute of Rheumatology and Autoimmune Disorders, Sakra World Hospital, Bangalore, India
Balebail G. Dharmanand

P.D. Hinduja Hospital and Medical Research Centre, Mumbai, India
G.C. Yathish

Mumbai Arthritis Clinic, Mumbai, India
Shashank M. Akerkar

Department of Rheumatology, ISIC Superspeciality Hospital and 'A&R Clinic for Arthritis & Rheumatism', New Delhi, India
Anand N. Malaviya

Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran
Arman Ahmadzadeh

Central Clinic, Tokyo, Japan
Tomoko Hasunuma

Kenya National Hospital, Nairobi, Kenya
Benard O. Owino

Facultad de Medicina, Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua, Chihuahua, Mexico
César Pacheco-Tena

Departamento de Medicina, Clínica Hospital ISSSTE, Gómez Palacio, Mexico
Aaron Frausto-Arenas

Universidad de Colima, Colima, Mexico
Adrián A. De la Madrid-Cernas

Centro Reumatológico de Querétaro, Querétaro, Mexico
Román Cardona-Cabrera

Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social, Hermosillo, Mexico
Juan D. Centeno-Valadez

Unidad de Enfermedades Reumáticas y Crónico Degenerativas, Torreón, Mexico
Isaura M. Rodríguez-Torres

National Center for Rheumatic Diseases, Kathmandu, Nepal
Binit Vaidya

Kathmandu, Nepal
Arun K. Gupta

Department of Medicine, University of Otago Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand
Andrew A. Harrison

Department of Medicine and Department of Pathology and Molecular Medicine, University of Otago Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand
Rebecca Grainger

Nnamdi Azikiwe University Teaching Hospital, Nnewi, Nigeria
Henry M. Nwankwo

Department of Rheumatology, Hospital for Rheumatic Diseases, Haugesund, Haugesund, Norway
Andreas P. Diamantopoulos
Elisabeth Mæland

UiT the Arctic University of Norway and Finnmarkssykehuset i Kirkenes, Kirkenes, Norway

Emilio Besada

Hospital Santo Tomas, Panama, Panama

Luis Gorriz

Hospital de Clínicas, Universidad Nacional de Asunción, Asunción, Paraguay

Margarita Duarte
Sonia Cabrera-Villalba

Sanatorio Santa Clara, Asunción, Paraguay

Maria T. Romero-de Albrecht

Hospital Carlos Alcántara B, Lima, Peru

Augusto García-Poma

Hospital Nacional Edgardo Rebagliati Martins, EsSalud, Lima Peru, and Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, Lima, Peru

María I. Segami

Hospital Nacional Edgardo Rebagliati Martins, EsSalud, Lima, Peru

María P. Ramos
Wilkerson Pérez-Medina

Dr. Pablo O. Torre Memorial Hospital, Manila, Philippines

Maria L. Dianongco

St Luke's Medical Center, Manila, Philippines

Juan J. Lichauco

St. Luke's Medical Center BGC; Manila Doctors Hospital; University of the Philippines-Philippine General Hospital, Manila, Philippines

Geraldine Z. Racaza

University of Santo Tomas Hospital, Manila, Philippines

Sandra V. Navarra
Tito P. Torralba

University of the Philippines-Philippine General Hospital, Manila, Philippines

Bernadette H. Manapat-Reyes
Ester G. Penserga

Hamad Medical Corporation, Doha, Qatar

Mohammed Hammoudeh
Samar Al-Emadi

Privat out-patients' clinic "Agat", Egorievsk, Russia

Anna G. Botchkova

Department of Medicine, Rheumatology Unit, King Fahd Hospital, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Sabri H. AlSaeedi

Alzaidi Chair of Research in Rheumatic Diseases-Umm Alqura University, Makkah, Saudi Arabia, and Department of Medicine, Dr. Soliman Fakeeh Hospital, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Hani Almoallim

King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Hussein F. Al-Arfaj

Koh Wei Howe Arthritis & Rheumatism Medical Clinic, Singapore, Singapore

Wei H. Koh

Department of Rheumatology & Immunology, Singapore General Hospital, and Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School, Singapore, Singapore

Ying Y. Leung

Tygerberg Hospital and Stellenbosch University, Bellville, South Africa

David A. Whitelaw

Department of Medicine, Division of Rheumatology, University of Cape Town and Groote Schuur Hospital, Cape Town, South Africa

Bridget Hodgkinson

Hospital Universitari Sagrat Cor, Barcelona, Spain

Javier García-Miguel

Rheumatology Unit. IDC-Salud, Clínica del Pilar, Barcelona, Spain

Juan C. Duro

Department of Rheumatology, Hospital Universitario La Paz, Madrid, Spain

Emilio Martin-Mola

Hospital Central de la Defensa Gómez Ulla, Madrid, Spain

María Ahijón-Lana

Hospital Universitario Puerta de Hierro, Majadahonda, Spain

José L. Andreu

University Hospitals of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland

Axel Finckh
Deshiré Alpizar-Rodríguez

Division of Rheumatology, Department of Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand

Manathip Osiri

Division of Rheumatology, Department of Internal Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai, Thailand

Nuntana Kasitanon
Worawit Louthrenoo

Amsterdam Rheumatology and Immunology Center (ARC), Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Ronald F. van Vollenhoven

Amsterdam Rheumatology and Immunology Center (ARC), Department of Clinical Immunology & Rheumatology, Academic Medical Center, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Niek de Vries

Amsterdam Rheumatology and Immunology Center (ARC), Reade Institute, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Christiaan van Denderen
Martijn Gerritsen

VieCuri Medical Centre, Venlo, and Scientific Institute for Quality of Healthcare, Radboud University Medical Center, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Tim L. Jansen

Department of Rheumatology, Bernhoven, Uden, The Netherlands

Piet van Riel

Universidad Centroccidental Lisandro Alvarado, Clínica Razetti de Barquisimeto, Barquisimeto, Venezuela

Concepción M. Núñez-Sotelo

Servicio de Reumatología, Hospital Vargas, Caracas, Venezuela

Sol Villegas-Morales

Compliance with ethical standards

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