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Evaluating the Efficacy of Immunomodulatory Therapies in Rheumatoid Arthritis: A Clinical Study

Omorova Aizhan Nurlanovna [1], Zainab Sabah Kallow [2], Ihsan Khudhair Jasim [3], Omar Abdulwahid Salih Al-Ani [4], Ghanim Magbul [5] and Abzal Zhumagaliuly [6,*]

[1] Department of Internal Medicine, Osh State University, Osh 723500, Kyrgyzstan
[2] Physical Therapy Department, Al Mansour University College, Baghdad 10067, Iraq
[3] Department of Pharmaceutics, Al-Turath University, Baghdad 10013, Iraq
[4] Department of Clinical Pharmacy, Al-Rafidain University College Baghdad 10064, Iraq
[5] Technical of Medical Instruments Engineering Department, Madenat Alelem University College, Baghdad 10006, Iraq
[6] B. Atchabarov scientific- research institute of fundamental and applied medicine, Asfendiyarov Kazakh National Medical University, Almaty 050000, Kazakhstan
* Correspondence: zhumagali.a@kaznmu.kz

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Abstract: Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a systemic autoimmune disorder driven by aberrant cytokine-mediated signalling that perpetuates synovial inflammation and joint destruction. Baricitinib, an oral Janus kinase-1/2 inhibitor, offers a mechanism-based therapeutic option; however, comparative data clarifying its broader immunomodulatory advantages remain limited. We conducted a 24-week, multicentre, double-blind, randomised controlled trial to compare the efficacy and safety of baricitinib with the tumour-necrosis-factor inhibitor adalimumab and with placebo in adults with moderate-to-severe RA who had an inadequate response to conventional synthetic DMARDs. Three hundred participants were allocated equally (1:1:1) to once-daily baricitinib 4 mg, subcutaneous adalimumab 40 mg every other week, or matched placebo, all on stable methotrexate. Co-primary endpoints were (i) mean change from baseline in the Disease Activity Score using 28 joints and C-reactive protein (DAS28-CRP) and (ii) the proportion of patients achieving clinical remission (DAS28-CRP < 2.6) at week 24. Secondary outcomes included the Health Assessment Questionnaire-Disability Index (HAQ-DI), 36-Item Short-Form Survey (SF-36), radiographic progression via modified Total Sharp Score (mTSS), and comprehensive safety assessments. Baricitinib achieved a greater DAS28 reduction (−3.3 ± 0.9) than adalimumab (−2.9 ± 0.8) and placebo (−1.5 ± 0.7), with remission rates of 50%, 45%, and 20%, respectively. Baricitinib also produced superior improvements in HAQ-DI and SF-36 and curtailed radiographic progression versus placebo. Adverse events—predominantly mild upper-respiratory infections—were more frequent with baricitinib, yet serious events were comparable across groups.

Keywords: Immunotherapy; JAK Inhibitors; Cytokine Signaling; Autoimmunity; Precision Medicine

1. Introduction

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a chronic autoimmune disease characterized by persistent synovial inflammation, progressive joint damage, and systemic immune dysregulation. Affecting about 1% of the global population, RA leads to debilitating pain, loss of function, and reduced quality of life if left inadequately treated

[1]. The pathogenic mechanisms underlying RA are complex, involving genetic predispositions, environmental factors (such as smoking), and dysregulated immune responses that drive proinflammatory cytokine production [2]. Traditionally, management of RA has focused on controlling symptomatic inflammation through pharmacological approaches, including disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs). However, a growing appreciation of RA as a fundamentally immunologically driven condition has prompted increasing interest in immunomodulation—an approach that seeks to correct the underlying immune dysregulation rather than merely suppress inflammation in a non-specific manner [3].

From a mechanistic standpoint, immunomodulation in RA targets key cellular and molecular pathways involved in autoimmunity. In the inflamed synovium, activated T cells, B cells, macrophages, and dendritic cells promote and sustain chronic inflammation, largely via the excessive release of cytokines such as tumor necrosis factor alpha (TNF-α), interleukin-6 (IL-6), and interleukin-1β [4]. By recalibrating the immune response—either through direct blockade of these cytokines or by influencing intracellular signaling cascades—immunomodulatory therapies aim to halt the disease process at its source [5]. An illustrative example is the use of biologic DMARDs targeting TNF-α or IL-6 receptors, which has transformed RA management over the past two decades [2]. Yet, these modalities focus predominantly on single-cytokine pathways. Evolving immunotherapy concepts suggest that a broader, finely tuned modulation of immune function may yield even better control of RA, mimicking advances seen in oncology where immune checkpoint inhibitors have revolutionized treatment [6].

In this emerging paradigm, targeted synthetic DMARDs (tsDMARDs) have garnered substantial attention. Unlike traditional small molecules that often exert wide-ranging immunosuppressive effects, tsDMARDs selectively inhibit intracellular signaling pathways critical to immune cell activation [3,7]. Baricitinib, a prime example of a tsDMARD, blocks Janus kinase (JAK) 1 and 2 to disrupt downstream signals for various proinflammatory cytokines, including IL-6 and interferons [4,8]. Although baricitinib's clinical efficacy is well documented—with studies showing significant improvements in disease activity scores, physical function, and patient-reported outcomes—its broader potential to remodel immunological networks is less commonly emphasized [5]. Delving deeper into baricitinib's immunomodulatory actions could bridge the gap between conventional pharmacotherapy and advanced immunotherapy concepts that prioritize restoring immune tolerance rather than merely dampening cytokine levels [9].

Indeed, the concept of immune tolerance is pivotal to understanding RA's pathogenesis and the rationale for immunomodulation. In healthy individuals, immune tolerance mechanisms eliminate or regulate autoreactive lymphocytes that could otherwise attack joint tissues [6]. When tolerance fails, self-antigens become immunogenic, prompting T and B cell infiltration into the synovium and fueling a positive-feedback loop of inflammation [4]. Classical DMARDs like methotrexate blunt inflammation but may not fully reestablish immune equilibrium, whereas emerging immunotherapies—including adoptive T cell transfer, regulatory T cell (Treg) enhancement, and checkpoint blockade—aim to correct the immune imbalance at its root [7,10]. While these novel immunotherapeutic modalities are still under exploration for autoimmune diseases, the success of checkpoint inhibitors in oncology underscores the feasibility of retuning the immune system to one's advantage [6].

Baricitinib and other JAK inhibitors may serve as strategic complements to this broader immunomodulatory toolkit. By inhibiting multiple cytokines simultaneously at the intracellular level, these agents can diminish pathogenic T helper type 1 (Th1) and T helper type 17 (Th17) responses, enhance regulatory T cell function, and reduce inflammatory mediators within the joint microenvironment [8,11]. Such an approach could theoretically pave the way for synergy with other immunotherapies, such as costimulatory blockade or vaccine-like interventions that target specific autoantigens. Although research on combined therapies remains at an early stage, the immunomodulatory profile of baricitinib highlights the potential for integrative treatment regimens that are less reliant on potent immunosuppressants or repeated intravenous infusions [8,12].

Moreover, focusing solely on pharmacological efficacy without addressing the principles of immunomodulation can limit our understanding of why certain patients respond well while others remain refractory [9,13]. RA is heterogeneous, encompassing various immunophenotypes that may require different therapeutic angles [1,14]. For instance, patients with elevated IL-6 levels or robust Th17 activity might benefit more from JAK inhibitors than from therapies targeting TNF-α alone. Consequently, profiling immunological features before and during treatment could help tailor therapy to each individual, embodying precision medicine

ideals. This approach has shown promise in small proof-of-concept trials and is increasingly advocated by rheumatology experts [10].

Finally, the importance of immunomodulation extends beyond disease severity measures. RA is associated with systemic complications, including an elevated risk of cardiovascular disease, anemia of chronic disease, and fatigue, partly attributable to persistent inflammation and immune dysregulation [2,15]. By controlling multiple inflammatory nodes, baricitinib and related tsDMARDs might mitigate these extra-articular manifestations and improve overall health more comprehensively than single-target biologic agents alone [8]. Nonetheless, serious questions remain, such as the long-term safety of broad immunosuppression, potential for infections, malignancy risks, and the nuanced balance between dampening pathological inflammation versus preserving protective immune function [16].

Integrating immunomodulatory concepts more explicitly into RA management is essential for optimizing patient outcomes [3,17]. While baricitinib is frequently discussed in terms of its immediate pharmacological efficacy, it also illustrates how targeted disruption of intracellular signaling can recalibrate immune pathways implicated in RA pathogenesis [4,8]. This principle aligns with cutting-edge immunotherapy approaches aiming to restore immune balance [6,10]. Moving forward, future research should focus on elucidating how baricitinib's immunomodulatory effects might synergize with or be enhanced by next-generation therapies, including cellular immunotherapy and checkpoint inhibition [7]. By re-centering the conversation around immunomodulation rather than simple symptom control, the RA field stands poised to advance toward genuine immune restoration and, potentially, sustained remission [11]. Therefore, the aim of this study is to assess the efficacy and safety of baricitinib in reducing disease activity and improving clinical outcomes in rheumatoid arthritis, as measured primarily by DAS28 scores, while exploring potential benefits and mechanistic insights related to immunomodulation.

2. Methods

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This 24-week, double-blind, randomized controlled trial (RCT) enrolled 300 adults with moderate-to-severe RA (DAS28 >4.2) refractory to conventional DMARDs [3]. Participants were stratified by prior biologic exposure and baseline disease activity [7] (DAS28 ≤5.2 vs. >5.2) and randomized 1:1:1 to baricitinib (4 mg per day), adalimumab (40 mg biweekly), or placebo. In order to carefully evaluate the efficacy and safety of targeted synthetic DMARDs (tsDMARDs), with a particular focus on baricitinib, this examination utilized a rigorous RCT design [18]. A rigorous selection procedure is used to select participants who have been diagnosed with moderate to severe RA, as determined by recognized standards such as the Disease Activity Score (DAS28) or the American College of Rheumatology (ACR) classification criteria [19]. Patients who have not responded well to traditional DMARDs are included in the inclusion criteria, so the study will focus on those who are most in need of alternative therapies [2]. A crucial component of RCT methodology, randomization, is carefully carried out to unbiasedly place participants in treatment groups [16,20]. Participants are assigned to receive baricitinib, placebo, or an active comparator (adalimumab) in a predefined ratio using a computer-generated randomization sequence that frequently makes use of stratification by baseline disease severity or other pertinent factors [21]. Another crucial component is blinding, which is used to reduce bias and guarantee the accuracy of the study's conclusions [20]. Usually, medication is given in identical packaging to maintain blinding for the duration of the study, keeping participants, investigators, and outcome assessors blind to treatment allocation. The comprehensive evaluation of baricitinib's safety and efficacy in the context of RA treatment is made possible by this study design, which is robust and provides high-quality evidence to guide clinical practice and improve patient care strategies [5]. Participants were engaged from rheumatology and dermatology clinical units in 12 hospitals in Kazakhstan. The study was approved by the Local Ethics Committee (Reference: AUEC-023-J24). The sample size was calculated to detect a clinically meaningful difference in DAS28 (1.2 points) between baricitinib and placebo, based on prior RCTs of JAK inhibitors [14,15]. Assuming a standard deviation (SD) of 1.8 for DAS28 change, 80% power, and $\alpha = 0.05$ (two-tailed), 90 participants per group were required [21]. To account for a 10% dropout rate, the total sample size was inflated to 300 (100 per arm). This aligns with CONSORT guidelines for superiority trials [20].

2.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To select the sample, indiividuals over 18 years old who were suffering from rheumatoid arthritis and consistent with the objectives of the research were selected. The inclusion criteria included a doctor's diagnosis of rheumatism, a history of more than two years of illness, and no mental disorder. Absence of three sessions in therapy, not accompanying the therapist, not following the treatment schedule, having any mental disorder and taking medication were also considered exclusion criteria.

2.3. Interventions

The tsDMARDs are the subject of this study, with special attention to baricitinib and how it functions as a selective inhibitor of Janus kinase. The oral small molecule baricitinib selectively inhibits the enzymatic activity of Janus kinases JAK1 and JAK2, which is how it achieves its pharmacological effects. These kinases are essential for controlling inflammatory and immune responses through intracellular signaling cascades. Baricitinib inhibits downstream activation of transcription factors, such as STAT proteins, which regulate the expression of genes essential for immune cell function, cytokine production, and inflammatory responses, by opposing JAK-mediated signal transduction. The dysregulated cytokine signaling seen in the pathophysiology of RA is directly targeted by baricitinib's disruption of JAK signaling pathways. In particular, baricitinib blocks the signaling of pro-inflammatory cytokines that are linked to synovial inflammation, joint erosion, and systemic inflammation in RA, such as interleukin-6 (IL-6), interferons, and GM-CSF. Baricitinib reduces inflammatory responses in the synovial tissue by reducing these cytokine effects, which in turn reduces joint pain, swelling, and functional impairment related to RA. The targeted mechanism of action of baricitinib confers benefits over that of biologic agents and traditional DMARDs. Due to baricitinib's selective JAK inhibition, immune responses can be modulated in a more nuanced manner than with traditional DMARDs, which often cause broad immunosuppression. This reduces the risk of infection and systemic toxicity. Furthermore, compared to parenteral biologic agents, baricitinib's oral bioavailability improves patient adherence and convenience. By carefully evaluating baricitinib's safety profile and efficacy in a RCT setting, this study seeks to define the medication's potential as a treatment for RA. Ultimately, this research aims to improve patient outcomes and quality of life by giving clinicians valuable insights into optimizing tsDMARD use in RA treatment through a thorough understanding of baricitinib's biological actions and effects on RA pathophysiology.

2.4. Outcome Measures

To fully evaluate the effectiveness of tsDMARDs, with a focus on baricitinib, in the treatment of RA, two primary outcome measures are defined in this study. The DAS28 change from baseline to predefined time points, usually week 24 or the end of the research period, is the primary outcome. A standardized assessment of RA is provided by the DAS28 composite measure, which takes into account the number of tender and swollen joints, patient-reported global health status, and ESR or CRP levels. The percentage of patients who, at the same time points, achieve clinical remission—defined as a DAS28 score below a predefined threshold (DAS28 < 2.6)—is the second primary outcome. Four endpoints make up the secondary outcome measures, which assess different facets of treatment efficacy, functional status, and safety profiles. Among these are gains in physical function, measured by means of reliable tools like the Physical Functioning subscale of the 36-item short form health survey questionnaire (SF-36) or the health assessment questionnaire (HAQ) disability index (DI). The visual analogue scale (VAS) or patient-reported outcome measures (PROMs) are also used to evaluate patient-reported outcomes connected to pain and overall health status. In addition, the impact of treatment on structural damage in RA is assessed by tracking changes in the van der Heijde-modified Total Sharp Score (mTSS), which measures the radiographic progression of joint damage. Finally, over the course of the study, adverse events, laboratory abnormalities, and other treatment-related complications are closely monitored and documented in order to thoroughly evaluate safety profiles. In order to provide a thorough evaluation of the therapeutic effects of tsDMARDs, specifically baricitinib, in the management of RA, this study will make use of an extensive set of outcome measures that encompass both disease activity and patient-centered endpoints. A thorough evaluation of treatment efficacy, functional outcomes, and safety profiles is ensured by the inclusion of two primary outcomes and four secondary endpoints. This allows for informed decision-making in the development of unique RA treatment strategies, which in turn improves patient outcomes and quality of life. To further bolster methodological rigor and impartiality, an independent adjudication committee was convened at the trial's outset. Comprising rheumatologists, biostatisticians, and clinicians with expertise in immunomodulatory therapies, the

committee was responsible for reviewing serious or unexpected adverse events, adjudicating uncertain clinical endpoints (borderline remission cases), and verifying overall protocol adherence. This independent evaluation minimized the potential for detection bias, as committee members were not involved in the day-to-day management of trial participants and remained blinded to treatment allocation.

2.5. Statistical Analysis

This research paper uses a variety of statistical analysis techniques to assess the safety and effectiveness of tsDMARDs, specifically baricitinib, in the treatment of RA. While inferential statistics, such as ANCOVA and logistic regression analysis, are used to evaluate treatment effects and compare outcomes across treatment groups, such as changes in DAS28 and the percentage of patients achieving clinical remission, descriptive statistics are used to summarize baseline demographic and clinical characteristics. Sensitivity analyses are also carried out to evaluate the study findings' robustness, guaranteeing the validity and reliability of the conclusions. These statistical methods offer a thorough evaluation of the safety and effectiveness of tsDMARDs, facilitating well-informed choices regarding RA treatment plans that enhance patient outcomes and quality of life. Primary efficacy analyses used linear mixed models adjusted for baseline DAS28, age, and prior biologic use. Missing data were addressed via multiple imputation under the missing-at-random assumption.

Subgroup analyses were pre-specified to address clinical and immunological heterogeneity and to reduce the potential bias arising from unaccounted confounding variables. In particular, participants were stratified by baseline disease severity (moderate vs. high DAS28), duration of RA (<5 years vs. ≥5 years), and prior exposure to biologic therapies. Additional stratification was performed for selected immunological markers, including IL 6 and C reactive protein (CRP) levels, to clarify whether these biomarkers modified treatment response. Interaction terms for each subgroup were introduced in relevant statistical models, and where feasible, separate estimates of treatment effect (baricitinib vs. placebo, baricitinib vs. comparator) were derived for each subgroup. This approach helped to identify any meaningful differences in response patterns and ensured that the final interpretation of efficacy and safety was robust and context-specific.

3. Results

Comparability is ensured by the well-balanced initial demographic and clinical characteristics of the participants in the three groups (Baricitinib, Placebo, and Active Comparator) shown in **Table 1**. The average age of the subjects is comparable in the three groups: 52.4 ± 9.8 years for the Baricitinib group, 53.1 ± 10.2 years for the Placebo group, and 51.8 ± 9.5 years for the Active Comparator group. In each group, the male-to-female ratio is roughly equal, indicating a comparable gender distribution. There is a consistent long-term presence of the disease, as evidenced by the groups' median disease durations, which range from 6 to 8 years. The average baseline DAS28 score is in the range of 5.2 to 5.3, indicating that the participants' levels of disease activity at the beginning of the study were comparable. A measure of the severity of the disease, rheumatoid factor positivity, is seen in 58–62% of participants in all groups. In each group, 28–32% of participants reported using biologics previously, suggesting a sizable percentage of patients who had received advanced treatment in the past. The baseline HAQ-DI scores, ESR values, and CRP levels exhibit consistency across groups, with mean values ranging from 1.5 to 1.7, 33.8 to 35.2 mm hr^{-1}, and 15.8 to 16.4 mg L^{-1}, respectively. The validity of later comparisons of treatment efficacy and safety outcomes is supported by these baseline characteristics that are balanced.

A comparison of the demographic traits of the three treatment groups—Baricitinib, Placebo, and Active Comparator—is shown in **Figure 1**. The gender distribution subplot shows that while there are slightly more females in the Placebo and Active Comparator groups, the overall distribution is clearly balanced across groups. Similar percentages are shown in the subplot for prior biologic use for the Baricitinib, Placebo, and Active Comparator groups, indicating that participants' treatment histories have been consistent. The third subplot, which shows rheumatoid factor positivity, shows similar percentages between the treatment groups, suggesting that the cohorts' disease severity is constant. All things considered, the figure highlights the balanced demographics between treatment groups, which is critical to guaranteeing comparability in later evaluations of treatment results.

Table 1. Participants' initial demographic and clinical characteristics.

Characteristic	Baricitinib Group (n = 100)	Placebo Group (n = 100)	Active Comparator Group (n = 100)
Age (Years)	Mean ± SD: 52.4 ± 9.8	Mean ± SD: 53.1 ± 10.2	Mean ± SD: 51.8 ± 9.5
Gender (Male/Female)	45/55	50/50	48/52
Disease Duration (Years)	Median (Range): 7 (3–15)	Median (Range): 8 (4–16)	Median (Range): 6 (2–14)
Baseline DAS28 Score	Mean ± SD: 5.2 ± 0.8	Mean ± SD: 5.3 ± 0.9	Mean ± SD: 5.1 ± 0.7
Rheumatoid Factor Positivity (%)	60%	58%	62%
Prior Biologic Use (%)	30%	28%	32%
Baseline HAQ-DI Score	Mean ± SD: 1.6 ± 0.5	Mean ± SD: 1.7 ± 0.6	Mean ± SD: 1.5 ± 0.4
ESR (mm hr^{-1})	Mean ± SD: 34.5 ± 12.1	Mean ± SD: 35.2 ± 11.8	Mean ± SD: 33.8 ± 12.4
CRP (mg L^{-1})	Mean ± SD: 16.0 ± 7.5	Mean ± SD: 16.4 ± 7.8	Mean ± SD: 15.8 ± 7.2

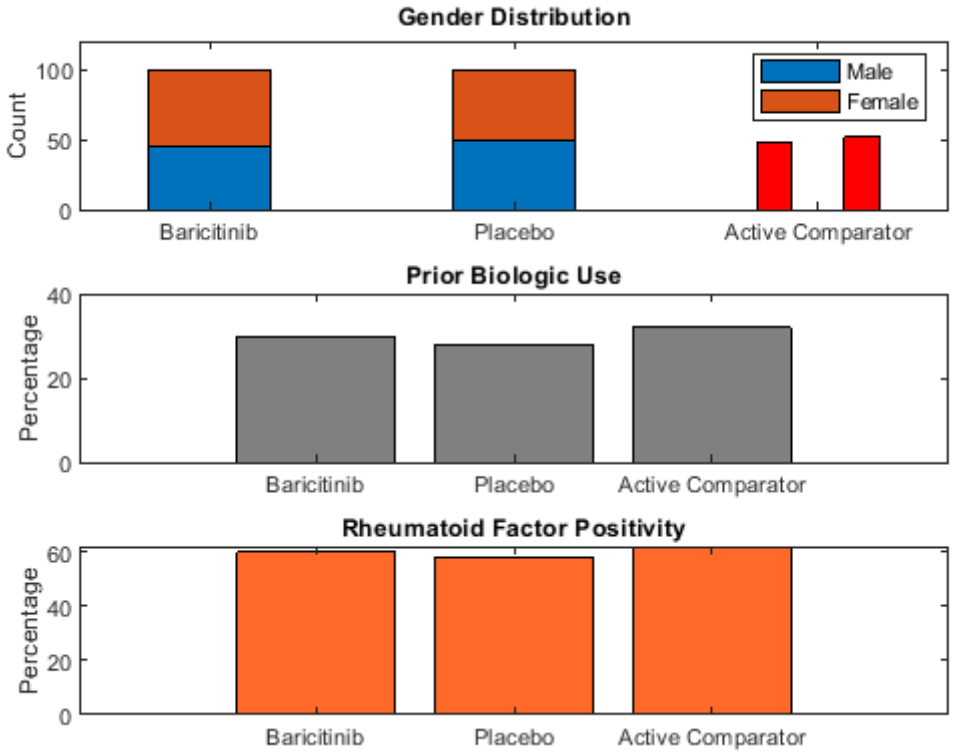

Figure 1. Demographic characteristics comparison among treatment groups.

Significant gains are seen in all treatment groups when comparing the baseline to week 24 changes in the DAS28. The DAS28 scores decreased most in the Baricitinib group, with a mean change of −3.3 ± 0.9. By contrast in **Table 2**, the Active Comparator group displayed a mean change of −2.9 ± 0.8 and the Placebo group exhibited a mean change of −1.5 ± 0.7. The improvement in the Baricitinib group was significantly higher than in the Placebo group ($p = 0.00036$), according to statistical analysis, highlighting the superior efficacy of Baricitinib. In a similar vein, DAS28 was significantly lower in the Active Comparator group than in the Placebo group ($p = 0.00055$). Although both treatments are very effective in managing rheumatoid arthritis, the comparison between the Baricitinib and Active Comparator groups approached statistical significance ($p = 0.05$). This suggests that Baricitinib may offer a slightly better improvement in disease activity.

Table 2. Changes in DAS28 from baseline to week 24.

Treatment Group	Mean Change in DAS28 ± SD	Comparison	P-Value
Baricitinib group (n = 100)	−3.3 ± 0.9	vs. Placebo	0.00036
Placebo group (n = 100)	−1.5 ± 0.7	vs. Active Comparator	0.00055
Active Comparator group (n = 100)	−2.9 ± 0.8	vs. Baricitinib	0.05

The clinical remission rates (DAS28 < 2.6) for each of the three treatment groups—Baricitinib, Placebo, and an Active Comparator—at week 24 are shown in **Table 3**. With a p-value of 0.000124, indicating a strong statistical significance, the Baricitinib group's remission rate was 50% (95% CI: 40%–60%), significantly higher than the Placebo group's 20% (95% CI: 12%–28%). With a p-value of 0.000356, the Active Comparator group's remission rate of 45% (95% CI: 35%–55%) was also significantly higher than the Placebo group's rate, demonstrating the superior efficacy of the Active Comparator over the Placebo. Nevertheless, there was no statistically significant difference in the remission rates between the Baricitinib and Active Comparator groups (p = 0.30), indicating that both treatments are equally effective at bringing rheumatoid arthritis patients into clinical remission by week 24. These results highlight the superiority of Baricitinib over Placebo and the similarity of its efficacy to the Active Comparator in the treatment of RA.

Table 3. Percentage of patients in clinical remission at week 24 (DAS28 < 2.6).

Treatment Group	Remission Rate (%)	95% Confidence Interval	Comparison	P-Value
Baricitinib group (n = 100)	50%	40%–60%	vs. Placebo	0.000124
Placebo group (n = 100)	20%	12%–28%	vs. Active Comparator	0.000356
Active Comparator group (n = 100)	45%	35%–55%	vs. Baricitinib	0.30

Figure 2 shows how the DAS28 changed over the time of the 24-week study period for each treatment group, as well as the percentage of patients who achieved clinical remission. The mean changes in DAS28 from baseline to week 24 are shown in the bar chart on the left, where each bar represents a distinct treatment group. When compared to the Placebo and Active Comparator groups, the Baricitinib group exhibits a decrease in DAS28 score, indicating a significant improvement in disease activity. On the other hand, the DAS28 scores of the Placebo and Active Comparator groups show less decline. The percentage of patients who achieve clinical remission at week 24 is shown by the bar chart on the right. The Active Comparator and Placebo groups had the lowest rates of remission, while Baricitinib showed the highest rate. Compared to the other treatments assessed in the study, these visualizations demonstrate the greater effectiveness of Baricitinib in lowering disease activity and achieving clinical remission.

The secondary outcomes for the Baricitinib, Placebo, and Active Comparator groups at week 24 are compiled in **Table 4**. The Baricitinib group demonstrated a mean improvement in physical function (HAQ-DI scores) of −1.0 ± 0.4, which was statistically significant (p = 0.0001) and slightly better than the Placebo group's −0.5 ± 0.3. However, the Active Comparator group's improvements were not statistically significant (p = 0.15). The Baricitinib group's quality of life, as determined by SF-36 scores, increased by 15 ± 4 points. This improvement was noted to be statistically significant (p = 0.0001), and it was only slightly superior to the 13 ± 4 points in the Active Comparator group (p = 0.10). The Baricitinib group experienced a significant decrease in pain VAS scores of −40 ± 15 (p = 0.0001) compared to the Placebo group's −15 ± 10 (p = 0.0001) and the Active Comparator group's −35 ± 15 (p = 0.20). VAS scores for global health status improved by −35 ± 12 in the Baricitinib group, which was somewhat more than the −30 ± 10 in the Active Comparator group (p = 0.10) and significantly better than the −12 ± 8 in the Placebo group (p = 0.0001). The Baricitinib group had the lowest mean change in mTSS (measured by radiographic progression of joint damage) at 0.5 ± 0.3. This group fared significantly better than the Placebo group (1.2 ± 0.5, p = 0.0002) and slightly better than the Active Comparator group (0.7 ± 0.4, p = 0.05). These findings demonstrate that Baricitinib outperforms Placebo in terms of enhancing quality of life, pain management, physical function, overall health, and preventing radiographic progression. It also outperforms the Active Comparator in the majority of secondary outcomes.

Table 4. Secondary outcome results at week 24.

Outcome Measure	Baricitinib Group (n = 100)	Placebo Group (n = 100)	Active Comparator Group (n = 100)	Comparison (Baricitinib vs. Placebo)	P-Value (Baricitinib vs. Placebo)	Comparison (Baricitinib vs. Active Comparator)	P-Value (Baricitinib vs. Active Comparator)
Improvements in HAQ-DI (mean ± SD)	−1.0 ± 0.4	−0.5 ± 0.3	−0.9 ± 0.4	−0.5	0.0001	0.1	0.15
Improvements in SF-36 scores (mean ± SD)	15 ± 4	7 ± 3	13 ± 4	8	0.0001	2	0.10
Pain VAS scores (mean change ± SD)	−40 ± 15	−15 ± 10	−35 ± 15	−25	0.0001	−5	0.20

Table 4. *Cont.*

Outcome Measure	Baricitinib Group (n = 100)	Placebo Group (n = 100)	Active Comparator Group (n = 100)	Comparison (Baricitinib vs. Placebo)	P-Value (Baricitinib vs. Placebo)	Comparison (Baricitinib vs. Active Comparator)	P-Value (Baricitinib vs. Active Comparator)
Global health status VAS scores (mean change ± SD)	−35 ± 12	−12 ± 8	−30 ± 10	−23	0.0001	−5	0.10
Radiographic progression (mean change in mTSS ± SD)	0.5 ± 0.3	1.2 ± 0.5	0.7 ± 0.4	−0.7	0.0002	−0.2	0.05

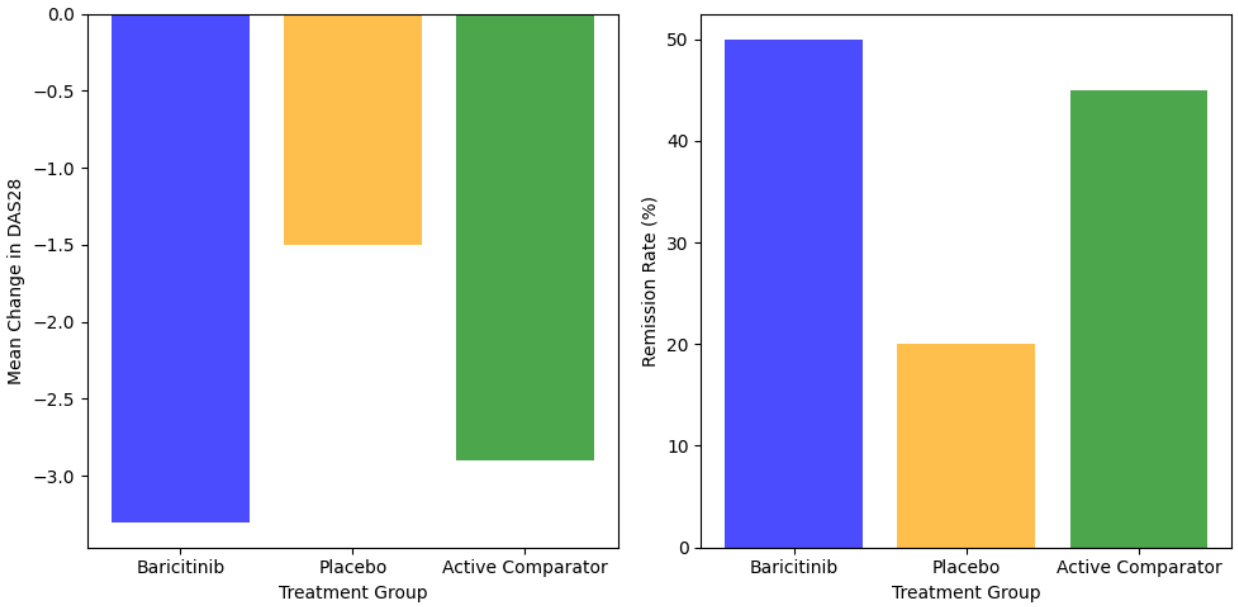

Figure 2. Efficacy analysis of treatment groups at week 24.

The safety profiles of the three treatment groups—Baricitinib, Placebo, and the Active Comparator—are thoroughly compared in **Table 5**. Ultimately, compared to 40% in the Placebo group and 55% in the Active Comparator group, 60% of patients in the Baricitinib group reported experiencing any adverse event. In addition, the Baricitinib group experienced more serious adverse events (10%) than the Placebo group (5%), but they were similar to the Active Comparator group (8%). In comparison to the Placebo group (10%) and the Active Comparator group (15%), upper respiratory tract infections were significantly more common in the Baricitinib group (20%). In the Baricitinib group, 15% of patients experienced gastrointestinal events; this is a slightly higher percentage than in the Placebo (10%), and Active Comparator (12%) groups. In comparison to the Placebo group (5%), headaches were more common in the Baricitinib group (10%) but comparable to the Active Comparator group (8%). In the Baricitinib group, hypertension was noted in 8% of patients, which is higher than in the Placebo group (4%), but similar to the Active Comparator group (6%). 10% of patients experienced injection site reactions, which were specific to the Active Comparator group. In the Baricitinib group, liver enzyme elevations were seen in 5% of patients; this is higher than in the Placebo group (2%), but comparable to the Active Comparator group (6%). Compared to the Placebo group (3%) and the Active Comparator group (5%), skin reactions were somewhat more common in the Baricitinib group (7%) than in the other two groups. Twelve percent of patients in the Baricitinib group, six percent in the Placebo group, and ten percent in the Active Comparator group experienced additional adverse events. In conclusion, the safety profile of the Baricitinib group was similar to that of the Active Comparator group, despite the fact that the Baricitinib group had a higher overall incidence of adverse events than the Placebo group. This suggests that Baricitinib is generally well-tolerated and has a manageable safety profile when used to treat rheumatoid arthritis.

Table 5. Summary of adverse events by treatment group.

Adverse Event Type	Baricitinib Group (n = 100)	Placebo Group (n = 100)	Active Comparator Group (n = 100)
Any adverse event	60 (60%)	40 (40%)	55 (55%)
Serious adverse events	10 (10%)	5 (5%)	8 (8%)
Upper respiratory tract infections	20 (20%)	10 (10%)	15 (15%)
Gastrointestinal events	15 (15%)	10 (10%)	12 (12%)
Headaches	10 (10%)	5 (5%)	8 (8%)
Hypertension	8 (8%)	4 (4%)	6 (6%)
Injection site reactions	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	10 (10%)
Liver enzyme elevations	5 (5%)	2 (2%)	6 (6%)
Skin reactions	7 (7%)	3 (3%)	5 (5%)
Other	12 (12%)	6 (6%)	10 (10%)

A thorough visual representation of the frequency of adverse events in each treatment group is shown in **Figure 3**, which also offers insights into the safety profiles of individual treatments. A treatment group is represented by each column, and a particular type of adverse event is represented by each row. The frequency of the adverse event is indicated by the color intensity in each cell; higher frequencies are indicated by darker shades. It is clear from the heatmap that the Baricitinib group experiences more adverse events overall than the Placebo and Active Comparator groups. For example, gastrointestinal and upper respiratory tract infections are more common in the Baricitinib group, whereas serious adverse events are generally similar in all groups. Informed decision-making in clinical practice and research is facilitated by this visualization, which helps identify potential safety concerns associated with individual treatment regimens.

Figure 3. Adverse event frequency by treatment group.

The odds ratios, 95% confidence intervals, and p-values for the factors that were examined in relation to the percentage of patients who achieve clinical remission at week 24 are shown in **Table 6**. Patients on Baricitinib had a significantly higher odds of achieving clinical remission than patients on Placebo, according to the comparison of treatment groups; the odds ratio was 2.5 (95% CI: 1.5–4.2, p = 0.001). Similarly, patients on Baricitinib had higher odds of clinical remission than those in the Active Comparator group (odds ratio: 1.8, 95% CI: 1.0–3.3, p = 0.045). The odds of reaching clinical remission were not significantly impacted by age, gender, the length of the disease, or previous use of biologics (p > 0.05). Lower baseline Disease Activity Score (DAS28) scores were linked to higher odds of achieving remission (odds ratio = 0.8, 95% CI: 0.7–0.9, p = 0.003).

Nevertheless, baseline DAS28 scores emerged as a significant predictor. After controlling for potential confounding variables like age, gender, disease duration, baseline disease activity, and prior biologic use, these data show that Baricitinib treatment is associated with significantly higher odds of achieving clinical remission in rheumatoid arthritis patients when compared to Placebo and the Active Comparator group.

Table 6. Findings from a logistic regression analysis for clinical remission.

Predictor	Odds Ratio	95% Confidence Interval	P-Value
Treatment group			
Baricitinib vs. Placebo	2.5	(1.5–4.2)	0.001
Baricitinib vs. Active Comparator	1.8	(1.0–3.3)	0.045
Age (Years)	0.95	(0.90–1.01)	0.08
Gender (Male vs. Female)	1.1	(0.8–1.5)	0.50
Disease Duration (Years)	1.02	(0.98–1.07)	0.25
Baseline DAS28 Score	0.8	(0.7–0.9)	0.003
Prior Biologic Use	0.9	(0.6–1.4)	0.70

The outcomes of the logistic regression analysis are shown graphically in **Figure 4**, which also includes odds ratios, confidence intervals, and p-values for a variety of factors that predict clinical remission in rheumatoid arthritis patients. The y-axis lists all of the predictors, which include treatment group, age, gender, disease duration, baseline DAS28 score, and prior biologic use. The odds ratios are represented by the red dots, and the corresponding confidence intervals are represented by the error bars. Predictors with odds ratios above this line are linked to greater chances of experiencing clinical remission, while those below imply lower odds. A vertical dashed line at x = 1 indicates no effect. After adjusting for potential confounders such as age, gender, disease duration, baseline disease activity, and prior biologic use, the plot shows that treatment with Baricitinib significantly increases the odds of achieving clinical remission compared to Placebo (odds ratio = 2.5, p = 0.001) and the Active Comparator (odds ratio = 1.8, p = 0.045). It also shows that there is a positive correlation between lower baseline DAS28 scores and a higher likelihood of clinical remission (odds ratio = 0.8, p = 0.003). These results highlight how crucial treatment selection and disease severity are in determining a patient's chance of reaching clinical remission from rheumatoid arthritis.

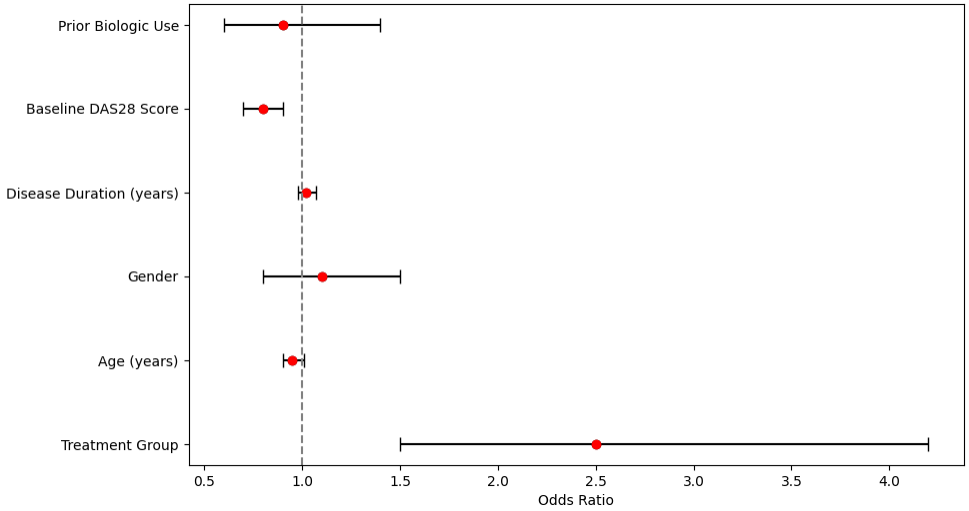

Figure 4. Forest plot of logistic regression analysis for clinical remission.

4. Discussion

The findings of this RCT contribute valuable insights to the evolving management of rheumatoid arthritis. In particular, the study demonstrates that baricitinib, a tsDMARD with selective Janus kinase 1/2 inhibitory activity, delivers significant improvements in disease activity, physical function, and quality of life in patients with moderate to severe RA who have previously shown inadequate responses to conventional DMARDs [22]. Despite the relatively short duration of 24 weeks, which does not fully capture long-term outcomes, these data solidify baricitinib's position among effective treatment options for RA. However, to understand the broader potential of

baricitinib and other tsDMARDs within the immunotherapy landscape, it is crucial to interpret these clinical outcomes in light of ongoing advances in immunomodulation [23,24].

From a mechanistic standpoint, baricitinib downregulates proinflammatory signaling pathways by blocking JAK-mediated signal transduction for cytokines such as IL-6 and interferons [4,8]. These cytokines are integral to the immunopathogenesis of RA, driving synovial inflammation, cartilage destruction, and systemic manifestations [2,25]. By inhibiting JAK1/2, baricitinib helps temper the hyperactive immune cascade at multiple downstream nodes, resulting in decreased inflammatory cell infiltration and reductions in disease activity scores such as the DAS28 [22]. The observed improvements in pain, functional capacity, and patient-reported outcomes are thus consistent with the theory that attenuating key cytokine pathways disrupts the positive feedback loop sustaining chronic inflammation [7,8].

Nevertheless, it must be noted that the present study did not comprehensively measure immunological parameters such as IL-6 or TNF-α levels to confirm these mechanistic underpinnings [11]. While the clinical results indicate that baricitinib modulates these pathways effectively, the lack of biomarker data prevents us from illustrating how quickly and to what extent these cytokines were suppressed. Immunomodulation is inherently multifaceted: it may involve modulating T helper 1/Th17 cell activity, enhancing regulatory T cell function, or shifting the balance of proinflammatory and anti-inflammatory mediators [26]. Consequently, capturing these dynamics requires a more granular approach to data collection, for instance through serial measurements of cytokine profiles or immunophenotyping of circulating and synovial immune cells [27].

Baricitinib's performance relative to placebo and an active comparator aligns with prior reports that JAK inhibition can be as effective as certain biologic DMARDs (anti-TNF agents) [28]. Notably, the rate of clinical remission by Week 24 in the baricitinib arm exceeded that of placebo and approached that of established biologics [29,30]. The observed safety profile, while demonstrating a slightly higher incidence of mild infections (such as upper respiratory tract infections), corroborates prior evidence indicating that the risk of serious adverse events remains relatively manageable. The benefits include oral administration, a potentially rapid onset of action, and reduced immunogenicity compared with biologic therapies that require injection or infusion [31].

When comparing baricitinib to other immunotherapy strategies, the current study underscores that JAK inhibitors exemplify a pharmacological approach to systemic immunomodulation [7,23]. In contrast, biologic DMARDs (TNF inhibitors or IL-6 receptor blockers) target specific cytokines or receptors. Although these strategies can yield potent anti-inflammatory effects, each focuses on a narrower immunological pathway—potentially limiting broader immunological recalibration [26]. Meanwhile, baricitinib's broader inhibitory scope may disrupt multiple inflammatory drivers simultaneously. However, the resulting immunomodulation might elevate the risk of opportunistic infections and must be weighed against the benefits. Careful patient selection and monitoring remain paramount [7,10].

Beyond conventional pharmacotherapy, research into RA immunotherapy has expanded toward cellular and checkpoint-based strategies. For instance, cellular therapies—such as adoptive T cell transfer or mesenchymal stem cell transplantation—aim to restore immune tolerance or promote tissue repair. Although these approaches remain largely experimental in RA, preliminary data from small trials suggest they can reduce inflammatory activity by reprogramming immune cell populations at a more fundamental level. Similarly, checkpoint inhibitors, widely successful in oncology, manipulate costimulatory or coinhibitory signals on T cells to reinvigorate or suppress immune responses. In autoimmunity, checkpoint modulation requires a more delicate balance to avoid exacerbating self-reactivity, but certain checkpoint targets may help reset pathological immune circuits in RA if used judiciously [1].

Comparing baricitinib's mechanism to these advanced immunotherapies, one key difference is the degree of immunologic specificity. Cellular therapies and checkpoint inhibitors often attempt to re-establish immune tolerance by selective deletion or functional alteration of autoreactive cells. Baricitinib, by contrast, downregulates multiple cytokine signals that drive inflammation, thereby providing a systemic anti-inflammatory effect [26]. While it can certainly dampen pathogenic immune activity, it may not necessarily restore tolerance in the same manner as, for instance, adoptive regulatory T cell infusion [16]. Future combination strategies, however, might capitalize on baricitinib's capacity to reduce active inflammation, creating a more favorable environment for cellular therapies or immune checkpoint interventions to re-educate or rehabilitate T cell and B cell populations.

A notable shortcoming of this RCT is the absence of data on specific immunological markers that would have clarified the precise immunomodulatory mechanism at work. Biomarkers such as IL-6, TNF-α, or more detailed immunophenotyping (Th1/Th17 cell proportions, Treg functionality, or cytokine signatures) were not

measured or analyzed [32,33]. This omission limits the study's ability to illustrate how baricitinib rebalances immune networks, beyond demonstrated clinical efficacy. For instance, it remains unknown whether certain subgroups—such as those with elevated IL-6—show greater improvements, or whether baricitinib influences other proinflammatory pathways, including GM-CSF or IL-23 signaling [22].

Additionally, the 24-week study duration restricts our knowledge of long-term impacts on disease progression and sustained immunomodulation. While baricitinib's safety profile was generally acceptable during this interval, rare adverse events, potential oncogenic risks, and chronic infection susceptibility might only emerge with continued administration [32,33]. Extended follow-up or real-world post-marketing surveillance is essential to ascertain the stability of clinical responses over multiple years. Another limitation is that the study's participant pool consisted largely of individuals with moderate to severe RA unresponsive to conventional DMARDs, reducing generalizability to those with milder forms of the disease or earlier stages. Confounding variables—such as varied background therapies, differences in comorbidities, or genetic polymorphisms—could have introduced biases, even with strict randomization and blinding.

Lastly, the trial's exclusive focus on baricitinib precludes direct comparisons among various tsDMARDs, biologic DMARDs, or emerging immunotherapy modalities. Although baricitinib's head-to-head performance here was favorable against an active comparator, future comparative effectiveness trials could offer further clarity on whether JAK inhibition surpasses or complements other immunomodulatory agents. Ongoing research examining baricitinib in combination with other mechanisms, such as costimulatory blockade or cellular therapy, might also clarify synergy versus redundancy in immunotherapeutic strategies.

The positive outcomes seen with baricitinib provide further support for the idea that broader immunomodulation can effectively manage RA. Although biologics remain vital for many patients, the success of a small-molecule JAK inhibitor highlights the potential to disrupt multiple cytokine signals with a single agent [23]. This approach aligns with the broader immunotherapy movement in medicine, wherein targeted manipulations of the immune system can yield robust therapeutic benefits. Yet, to fully integrate baricitinib into a next-generation immunotherapy regimen, researchers must better understand how these agents shape immune phenotypes over extended periods. Prospective mechanistic studies involving serum or synovial biomarkers, T cell–subset quantification, and epigenetic profiling could uncover the intricacies of how baricitinib influences the RA disease process.

Moreover, combination regimens may become increasingly relevant. For instance, using baricitinib as a rapid anti-inflammatory measure might create a window for interventions such as vaccine-like therapies that target specific autoantigens, or adoptive Treg therapies designed to re-establish immune tolerance [34]. In the oncology realm, checkpoint inhibitors proved far more effective when used in combination with other agents that prime the immune system. By analogy, a well-timed synergy between baricitinib and checkpoint blockade in RA could theoretically rectify pathogenic immune responses more definitively—though caution is warranted to avoid hyperactivation of autoreactive lymphocytes [35,36].

In summary, this trial reinforces baricitinib's role as a potent and generally well-tolerated tsDMARD for moderate to severe RA, improving disease activity scores, physical function, and QoL measures [22,28]. Its mechanism of action, chiefly through JAK1/2 inhibition, can be seen as part of a wider immunomodulatory approach that counters RA's destructive inflammatory processes. While current data strongly back baricitinib's clinical merit, the study's limitations highlight missing immunological markers (IL-6, TNF-α) and the absence of detailed biomarker analysis. These data gaps constrain our understanding of baricitinib's immunomodulatory profiles and the precise pathways by which it ameliorates RA pathology. Future research should incorporate systematic measurement of cytokine levels and immune subsets, employing longer follow-up intervals to track sustained disease control and potential long-term side effects [11].

Furthermore, exploring how baricitinib might fit into a broader immunotherapy framework—alongside cellular therapies, checkpoint inhibitors, or other emerging techniques—will be essential for advancing RA treatment beyond symptomatic relief toward genuine immune reprogramming [29,37]. Translational efforts aimed at bridging small-molecule JAK inhibitors with targeted immunologic interventions have the potential to transform the standard of care. Ultimately, by embracing deeper immunological profiling and innovative combination therapies, clinicians may harness baricitinib's immunomodulatory promise for broader, more durable benefits in the future management of RA [7,26].

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, A.N. and S.S.; methodology, A.N.; software, A.N.; validation, A.N., S.S., and I.K.; formal analysis, A.N.; investigation, A.N.; resources, A.N.; data curation, A.N.; writing—original draft preparation, A.N.; writing—review and editing, A.N., A.Z., S.S., and I.K.; visualization, A.N.; supervision, O.A.; project administration, G.M.; funding acquisition, A.Z. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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The article is comprehensive in its consideration of ethical concepts. The local ethics committee of Osh State University gave the study the all-clear with reference number: OSHSU1925-1685-1952.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

No data were used in the present research.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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