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Trends in Intensive Care Admissions and Outcomes of Stroke Patients Over 10 Years in Brazil

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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BACKGROUND: The coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic affected stroke care worldwide. Data from low- and middle-income countries are limited.

RESEARCH QUESTION: What was the impact of the pandemic in ICU admissions and outcomes of patients with stroke, in comparison with trends over the last 10 years?

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODS: Retrospective cohort study including prospectively collected data from 165 ICUs in Brazil between 2011 and 2020. We analyzed clinical characteristics and mortality over a period of 10 years and evaluated the impact of the pandemic on stroke outcomes, using the following approach: analyses of admissions for ischemic and hemorrhagic strokes and trends in in-hospital mortality over 10 years; analysis of variable life-adjusted display (VLAD) during 2020; and a mixed-effects multivariable logistic regression model.

RESULTS: A total of 17,115 stroke admissions were analyzed, from which 13,634 were ischemic and 3,481 were hemorrhagic. In-hospital mortality was lower after ischemic stroke as compared with hemorrhagic (9% vs 24%, respectively). Changes in VLAD across epidemiological weeks of 2020 showed that the rise in COVID-19 cases was accompanied by increased mortality, mainly after ischemic stroke. In logistic regression mixed models, mortality was higher in 2020 compared with 2019, 2018, and 2017 in patients with ischemic stroke, namely, in those without altered mental status. In hemorrhagic stroke, the increased mortality in 2020 was observed in patients 50 years of age or younger, as compared with 2019.

INTERPRETATION: Hospital outcomes of stroke admissions worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic, interrupting a trend of improvements in survival rates over 10 years. This effect was more pronounced during the surge of COVID-19 ICU admissions affecting predominantly patients with ischemic stroke without coma, and young patients with hemorrhagic stroke.

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KEY WORDS: coronavirus 2019; COVID-19 pandemic; hemorrhagic; ischemic; outcomes; stroke

ABBREVIATIONS: IQR = interquartile range; SAPS 3 = Simplified Acute Physiological Score 3; VLAD = variable life-adjusted display

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Take-home Points

Study question: Did the pandemic impact ICU admissions and outcomes of patients with stroke, in comparison with historical trends?

Results: The rise in COVID-19 cases was followed by increased mortality of stroke patients, mainly after ischemic stroke. Adjusted models showed increased mortality in 2020 compared with 2019, 2018, and 2017, in patients with ischemic stroke, especially in those without altered mental status. After hemorrhagic stroke, increased mortality in 2020 was observed in patients 50 years of age or younger, as compared with 2019.

Interpretation: The COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil during 2020 was associated with an overall decrease in ICU admissions for stroke and disrupted the trends of improvement in outcomes of those patients observed over a decade. The effect on increased mortality in 2020 was observed across all ages in noncomatose ischemic stroke patients but only in those younger than 50 years with hemorrhagic stroke.

Large national registries and stroke care networks from high-income countries reported a reduction in hospitalizations for stroke and increased mortality during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.^{1,2} Data also suggest an increase in severity in hospitalized patients with stroke, including a higher rate of large vessel occlusions and a more frequent indication of mechanical thrombectomy.³ The reasons for these observed patterns remain unclear but potentially include limited access to emergency care during mobility restrictions and lockdowns, increased prothrombotic risk factors caused by viral infection, organizational changes in stroke care, and reduced access to the stroke unit and ICU beds.⁴⁻⁷ However, data on this topic from large multicenter studies representing low and middle-income countries are still scarce.

We sought to analyze trends in crude and risk-adjusted mortality for stroke in a 10-year cohort of ICU patients in Brazil. We hypothesized that the pandemic would be associated with worse outcomes and impact the secular trend of ICU hospitalizations for stroke.

Study Design and Methods

Design

A retrospective cohort study was performed in 165 ICUs from 45 hospitals of an integrated private hospital network (Rede D'Or São Luiz). The use of fully anonymized cohort data for research purposes has been approved by the Local Ethics Committee and the Brazilian National Ethics Committee (CAAE: 17079119.7.0000.5249) without the need for informed consent. All data were anonymized previously for extraction and analysis.

Population

Patients admitted to an ICU with a main diagnosis of stroke from January 1, 2011, until December 31, 2020 were studied. We considered only the first admission to the ICU for each patient.

Data Collection

Data were routinely and prospectively collected using a standardized electronic system (Epimed Monitor ICU System, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil⁸). Information collected included demographic data (age, sex at birth), comorbidities, performance status on the week before ICU admission (measured by Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group classes, stratified in 0 or 1—*independent* or with minor performance impairment, 2—*moderate* performance impairment, and 3 or 4—*severe* performance impairment or bedridden),⁹ admission stroke type (ischemic vs hemorrhagic), Simplified Acute Physiological Score 3 (SAPS 3), the presence of altered mental status at admission (defined as the presence of delirium, stupor, or coma), neurological deficits, use of IV thrombolysis, the presence of cerebral mass effect in neuroimaging studies, indication of intracranial pressure monitoring or neurosurgery, the use of mechanical ventilation, ICU and hospital length-of-stay, and ICU and hospital mortality.

Primary Outcome

The primary outcome was in-hospital mortality from any cause of patients admitted to the ICU with ischemic or hemorrhagic stroke. Adjusted mortality rates in 2020 were compared with those in previous years.

Missing Data Policy

We excluded patients with missing hospital outcomes for the main analysis. No imputation of data was performed. In multivariable models, individuals with missing data on predictor variables were excluded.

Statistical Analysis

We used standard descriptive methods to report the main patients' features over the 10-year period of analysis. We assessed the association between admission year and outcome, using the following approach: An unadjusted exploratory analysis showing characteristics of the overall cohort and patients with each stroke type (ischemic or hemorrhagic) was performed, including premorbid conditions, admission severity measures, neurological status in the first 24 hours of admission, length of stay, and in-hospital mortality. We also performed an exploratory analysis to evaluate trends in characteristics and outcomes over the 10 years studied.

A subsequent analysis was performed with the trends in variable life-adjusted display (VLAD) for ischemic and hemorrhagic stroke patients in 2020, coupled with the number of COVID-19 admissions according to admission week during the same year. VLAD is an accumulated sum of adjusted mortality risks. In brief, for each surviving patient, a value equal to the predicted probability of dying by SAPS 3 score was added,^{10,11} and for each dying patient, the probability of survival was subtracted from the cumulative sum. For example, if a patient with a predicted mortality of 0.4 survives, 0.4 is added to the cumulative VLAD

sum; if the patient dies, 0.6 is removed from the sum. VLAD, therefore, increases if the system is outperforming the predicted mortality, and decreases in VLAD suggest a decrease in overall performance. VLAD was designed to allow frequent assessment of the performance of a unit over time and has been shown to be sensitive to changes in performance.¹²

Finally, we developed mixed-effects regression models to perform an adjusted analysis of in-hospital mortality risk from 2020 compared with previous years. We included age, altered mental status, admission year, the interaction of age \times admission year, and the interaction of altered mental status \times admission year as fixed effects,

a random intercept for unit, and random slopes for the year of admission. Models were developed separately for patients with ischemic and hemorrhagic stroke. These regression models were designed to account for sites (random intercept in hospitals) and either age or stroke severity, comparing 2020 with all other years in the cohort at the patient level.

We performed all analyses in R project version 4.0.2 with packages lme4¹³ and emmeans.¹⁴ We considered a *P* lower than .05 significant in the mixed-model results, with comparisons of mortality in 2020 in relation to previous years, and reported adjusted ORs and CIs of these pairwise comparisons.

Results

Overall, 17,115 stroke admissions were analyzed, from which 13,634 (79.7%) were ischemic and 3,481 (20.3%) were hemorrhagic. A summary of stroke patients' characteristics is shown in Table 1, including comorbidities, acute systemic and neurologic severity, and hospital outcomes, stratified by ischemic and hemorrhagic stroke. A similar description according to admission year is shown in e-Table 1. The median age was 70 (interquartile range [IQR], 55-81) years,

32% of patients had moderate to severe performance status impairment before the stroke, median SAPS-3 at admission was 47 (IQR 40-53) points, and 9% were mechanically ventilated on the first day of ICU admission. Five thousand three hundred five (31%) had altered mental status, and 32% had a focal neurological deficit. Seven hundred forty-nine (4%) had brain mass effect on neuroimaging, 3% received intracranial pressure monitoring, and 3% underwent neurosurgery on the first day of admission. Hospital

TABLE 1] Characteristics of Included Patients With Ischemic or Hemorrhagic Stroke

Characteristic	No.	Overall, N = 17,115 ^a	Hemorrhagic, N = 3,481 ^a	Ischemic, N = 13,634 ^a
Age, y	17,115	70 (55-81)	65 (51-79)	71 (57-81)
Female, No. (%)	17,115	9,089 (53%)	1,862 (53%)	7,227 (53%)
Charlson comorbidity index, points	17,070	1 (0-2)	0 (0-2)	1 (0-2)
Performance impairment (ECOG), No. (%)	16,846			
None/minor		11,510 (68%)	2,493 (73%)	9,017 (67%)
Moderate		4,009 (24%)	609 (18%)	3,400 (25%)
Severe		1,327 (7.9%)	321 (9.4%)	1,006 (7.5%)
MFI, points	14,586	2 (1-3)	2 (1-2)	2 (1-3)
SAPS 3, points	17,115	47 (40-53)	47 (38-56)	46 (41-52)
SOFA score \geq 1, No. (%)	14,821	7,279 (49%)	1,744 (58%)	5,535 (47%)
MV on first day, No. (%)	17,095	1,576 (9.2%)	876 (25%)	700 (5.1%)
Altered mental status, No. (%)	17,081	5,305 (31%)	1,364 (39%)	3,941 (29%)
Neurological deficit, No. (%)	17,081	5,459 (32%)	793 (23%)	4,666 (34%)
Glasgow \leq 13, No. (%)	15,409	3,018 (20%)	962 (31%)	2,056 (17%)
Brain mass effect, No. (%)	17,095	749 (4.4%)	527 (15%)	222 (1.6%)
ICP monitoring, No. (%)	16,956	458 (2.7%)	337 (9.8%)	121 (0.9%)
Thrombolytics, No. (%)	16,956	386 (2.3%)	...	386 (2.8%)
Neurosurgery, No. (%)	17,081	460 (2.7%)	201 (5.8%)	259 (1.9%)
Tracheostomy, No. (%)	16,956	644 (3.8%)	305 (8.8%)	339 (2.5%)
ICU LOS, d	17,115	3 (2-7)	5 (2-11)	3 (2-6)
Hospital LOS, d	17,115	8 (4-16)	10 (5-22)	7 (4-14)
In-hospital mortality, No. (%)	17,115	2,109 (12%)	837 (24%)	1,272 (9.3%)

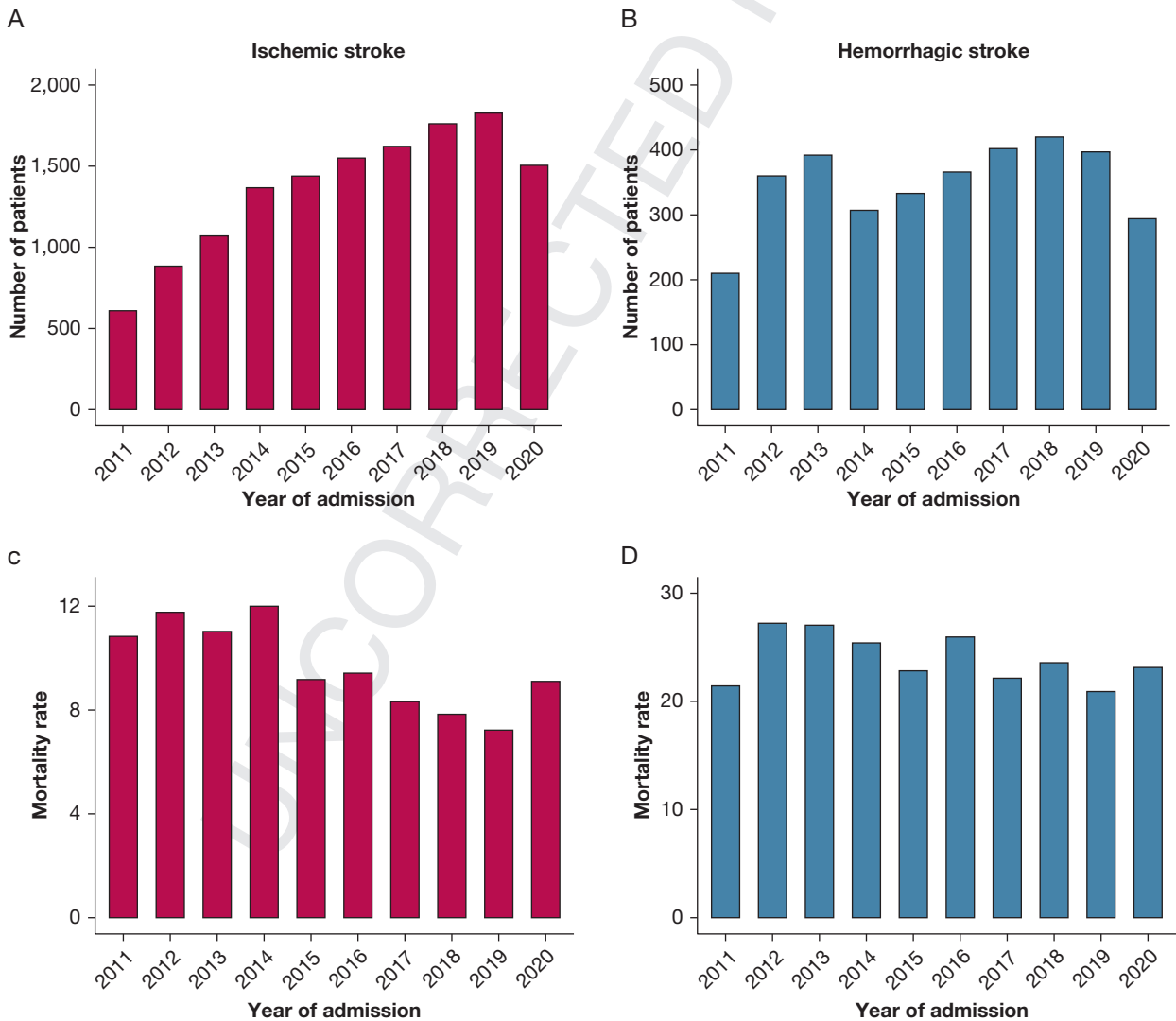
ECOG = Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group; Glasgow = Glasgow coma score; ICP = intracranial pressure; LOS = length of stay; MFI = modified fragility index; MV = mechanical ventilation; SAPS = Simplified Acute Physiology Score; SOFA = sequential organ failure assessment.

^aContinuous variables are expressed in median (25-75 interquartile range).

331 length of stay was 8 (IQR, 4-16) days, and in-hospital
 332 mortality was 12%. Ischemic etiology was four times
 333 more frequent than hemorrhagic stroke during the
 334 study period. In general, patients with ischemic stroke
 335 were older (71 [57-81] years vs 65 [51-79] years) and
 336 were less likely to be mechanically ventilated at
 337 admission (5% vs 25%) or to require neurosurgery
 338 (2% vs 6%) as compared with those with hemorrhagic
 339 stroke. Hospital length of stay was shorter (7 [4-14]
 340 days vs 10 [5-22] days), and crude in-hospital
 341 mortality was lower after ischemic stroke compared
 342 with hemorrhagic (9% vs 24%, respectively).

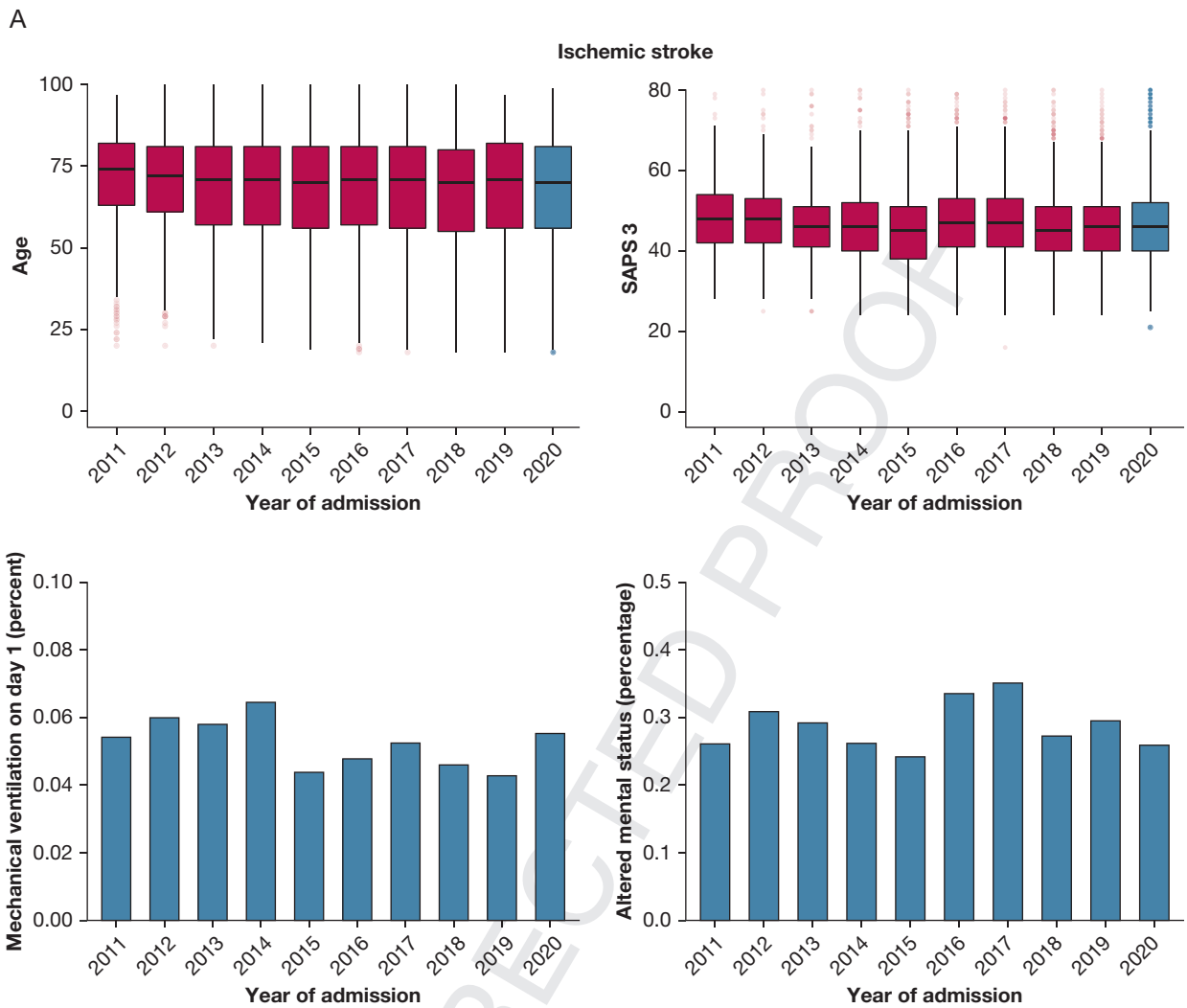
343 From 2011 to 2015, the number of patients admitted
 344 to the ICU with stroke per hospital in the network

345 increased from 43 to 59 and remained relatively
 346 stable from 2015 until 2019—59 per hospital in both
 347 years (e-Table 1). The trends in absolute numbers are
 348 shown in Figure 1 and e-Figures 1, 2, and 3. This
 349 was reversed in 2020, when a sharp reduction in the
 350 absolute number of patients (e-Figs 2 and 3) with
 351 ischemic (from 1,827 in 2019 to 1,505 in 2020—
 352 18% reduction) and hemorrhagic stroke (from 397 in
 353 2019 to 294 in 2020—26% reduction) was observed
 354 (Fig 1A and 1B). During the same period, we
 355 observed a trend toward reduced unadjusted in-
 356 hospital mortality rates for patients with ischemic
 357 stroke until 2019 (from 12% in 2014 to 7.2% in
 358 2019), which was also interrupted in 2020, when an
 359 increase in mortality was demonstrated (from 7.2% in



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Figure 2 – Trends in systemic and neurological severity measures on admission for patients with ischemic (A) and hemorrhagic stroke (B).

2019 to 9.1% in 2020—26% increase [Fig 1C]). No such trend over the years or any evident change in 2020 was found in patients with hemorrhagic stroke (Fig 1D). We analyzed age, SAPS-3, mechanical ventilation rates, and altered mental status at admission over the 10 years evaluated and found no clear trend toward increased severity of stroke patients admitted in 2020 compared with previous years (Fig 2A and 2B).

Changes in VLAD for stroke patients across epidemiological weeks of 2020 are shown in Figure 3A and stratified by ischemic and hemorrhagic in Figure 3B. The number of COVID-19 cases admitted to the participating units in the corresponding weeks is shown in Figure 3C. The rise in COVID-19 cases after the 11th week in 2020 was accompanied by a decrease in VLAD,

mainly in patients with ischemic stroke. Similarly, the reduction of COVID-19 admissions after the peak in week 17 was followed by an increase in VLAD, again, namely, in ischemic stroke patients.

In logistic regression mixed models, the OR for mortality in ischemic stroke was higher in 2020 vs 2019, 2018, and 2017, but similar to years 2016 through 2011 (except for those older than 80 and 90 years) (Fig 4 and e-Table 2). In patients with hemorrhagic stroke, the OR for mortality was higher in 2020 only in those younger than 50 years, compared with 2019 (Fig 5 and e-Table 3). When we stratified patients according to the presence of altered mental status on admission, the OR for mortality was higher in 2020 vs 2019, 2018, and 2017 only in those with ischemic stroke and with preserved mental status

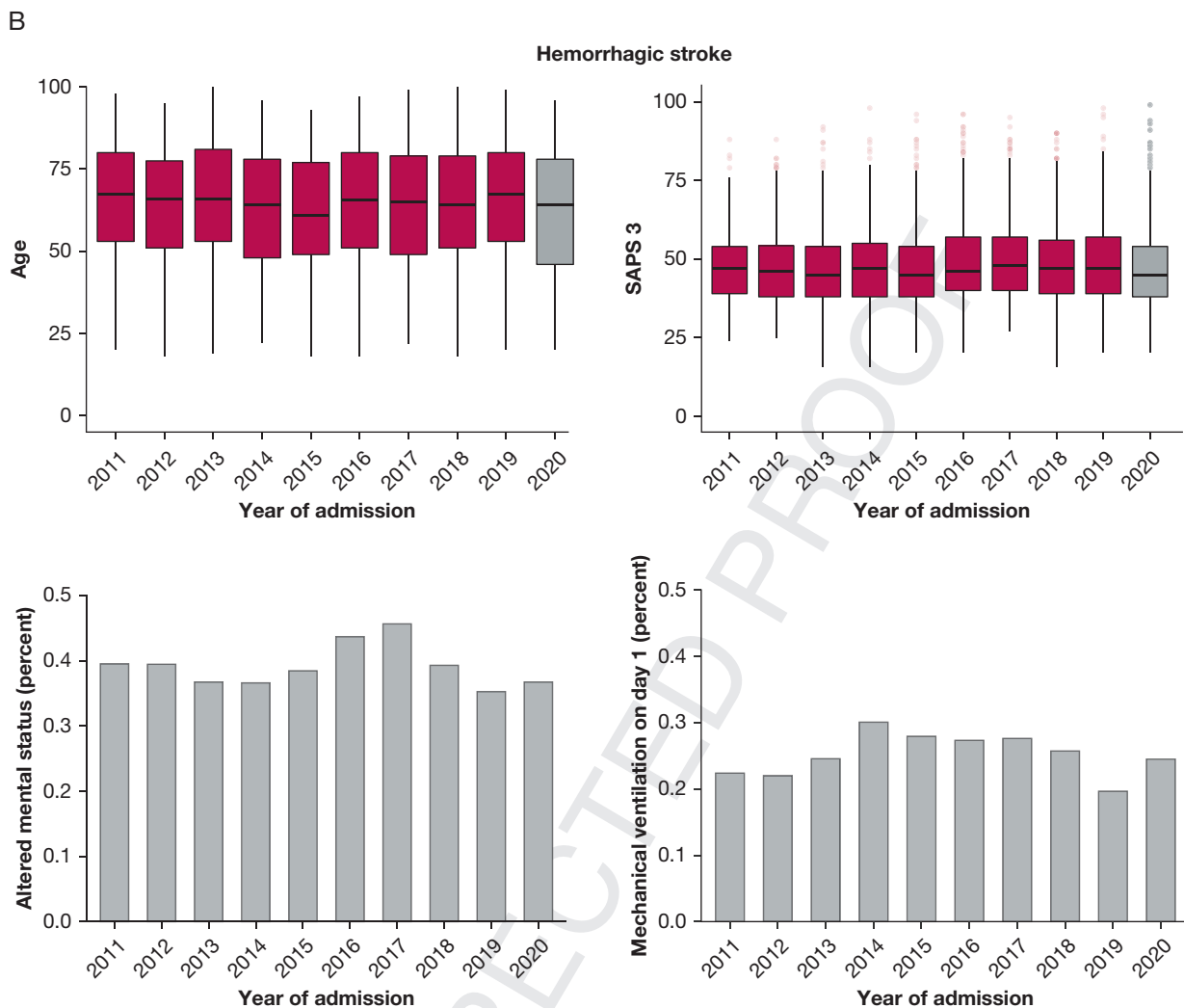


Figure 2 - Continued

at admission (eTables 4 and 5, Fig 6). Model results are detailed in e-Tables 6, 7, 8, and 9.

Discussion

Our study found that the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil during 2020 was associated with an overall decrease in the total number of ICU admissions with stroke, with a 19% reduction from 2019 to 2020. In addition, it disrupted the trends of improvement in outcomes of patients with ischemic stroke observed over a decade. The effect of increased mortality in 2020 was observed across all ages in ischemic stroke but only in those younger than 50 years with hemorrhagic stroke. Moreover, we demonstrated through the VLAD that surges in hospital admissions for COVID-19 were followed by worsening outcomes, especially among patients with ischemic stroke.

Our findings corroborate data from other cohorts that showed reductions in hospitalizations for ischemic stroke during the pandemic^{1,15,16}. In some countries, this was associated with severe movement restrictions and lockdowns. This was not the reality in Brazil,¹⁷ which suggests that other causes drove these reductions. Another potential explanation would be the limited access to ICU beds, occupied by patients with COVID-19. However, previously published data from our group showed that, despite the severe collapse of the public health care system,¹⁸ the private hospital network that contributed to this study underwent preparedness with increases in ICU bed and resource availability, which resulted in almost unrestricted access to ICU care.¹⁹ Thus, unmeasured factors are probably related to the observed reduction in hospitalizations for stroke, such as the fear of being infected with COVID-19 and the

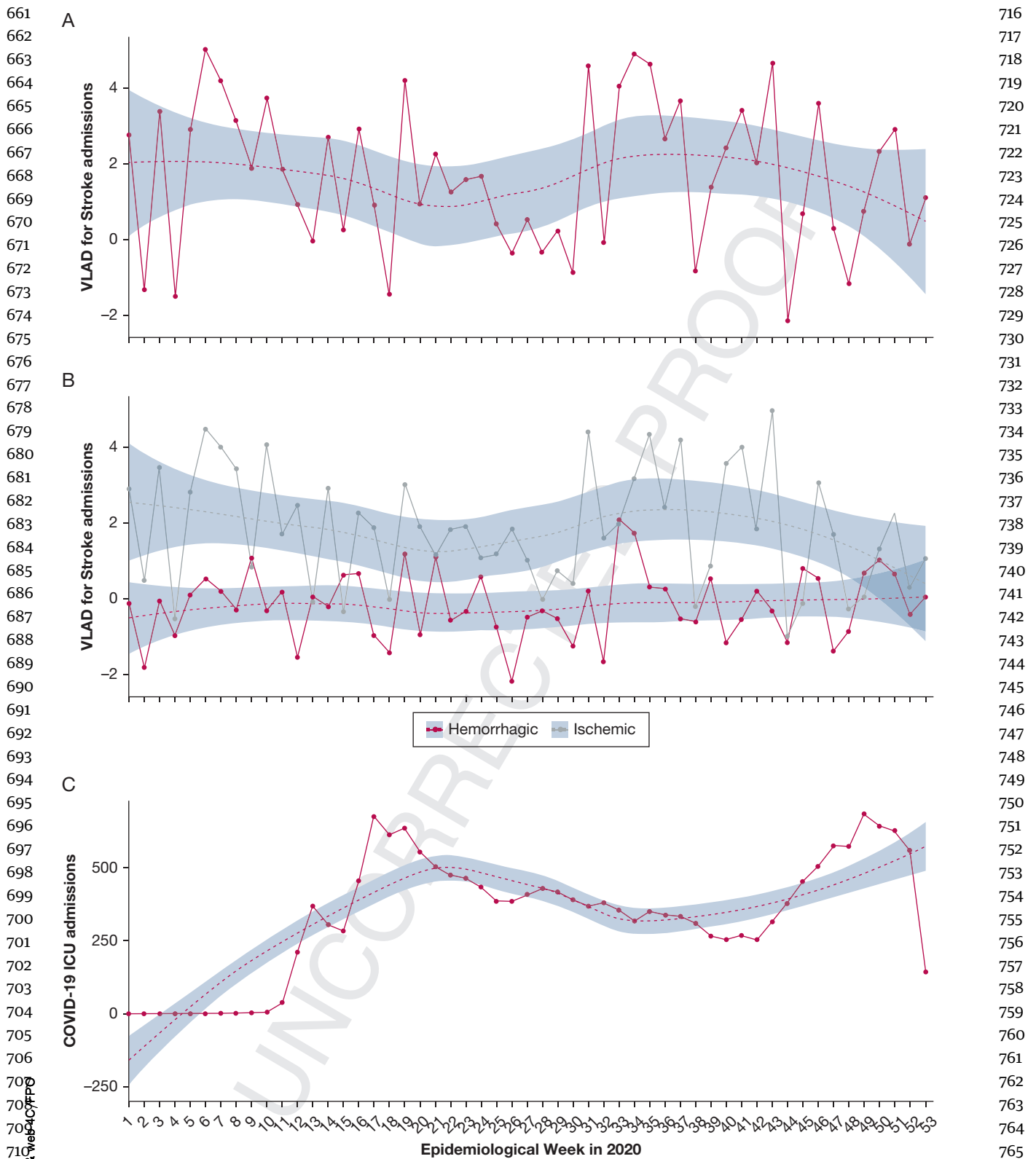


Figure 3 – (A) Weekly cumulative Variable-adjusted life display (VLAD) for all stroke patients during 2020, shown per week. Increases in VLAD suggest a lower-than-expected mortality, whereas downward shifts suggest the inverse trend. (B) Weekly cumulative VLAD, stratified by ischemic and hemorrhagic stroke. (C) Number of COVID-19 cases admitted to the participating ICUs according to the epidemiological weeks of 2020. Solid lines represent absolute values for VLAD (A and B) or n of COVID-19 admissions (C) per epidemiological week. Dotted lines and shaded areas represent smoothed averages and 95% CI.

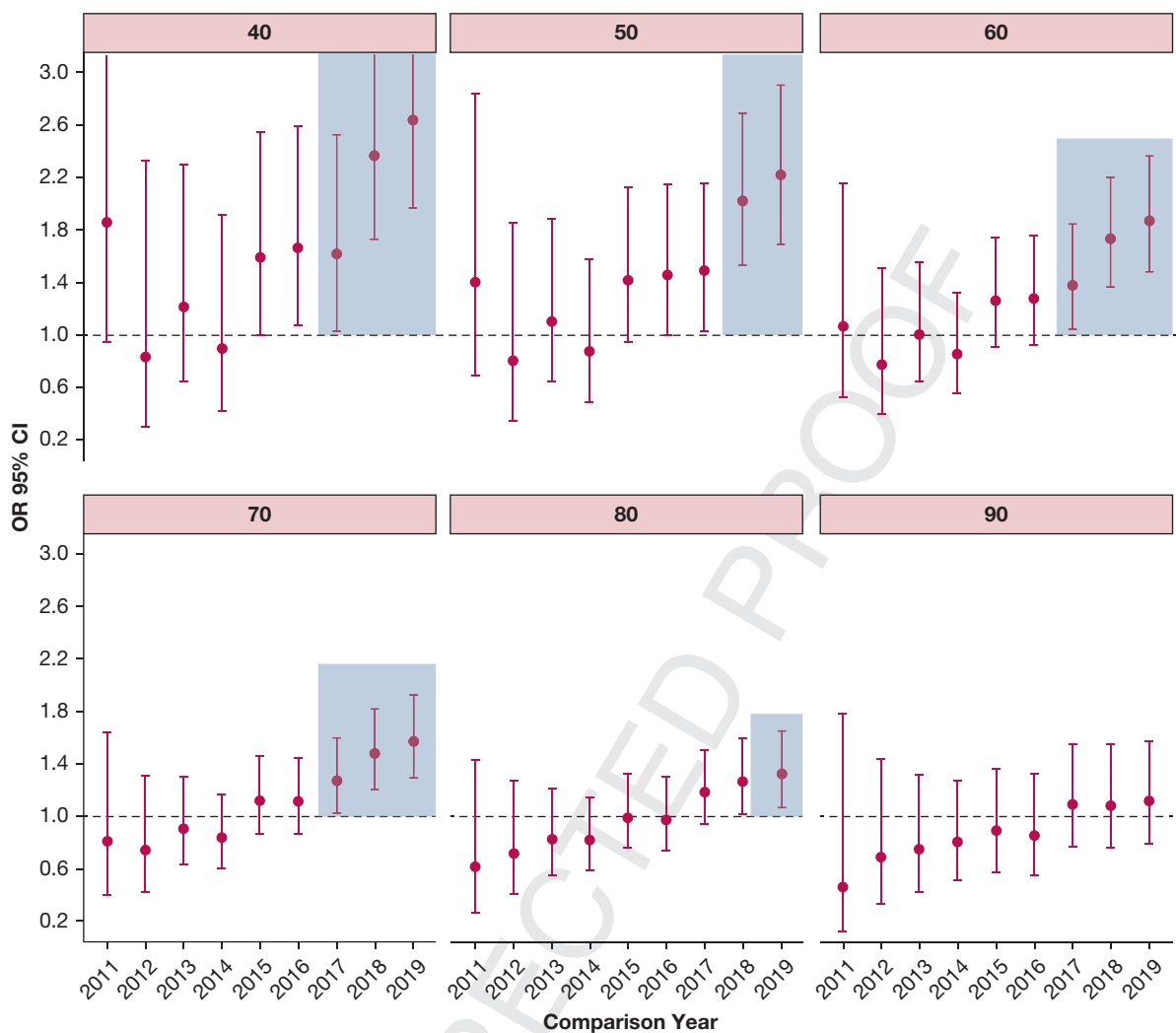


Figure 4 – OR and their corresponding 95% CI for mortality in 2020 vs other years (references in x-axis) for fixed age (panels) obtained through marginal means, in patients with ischemic stroke ($n = 13,634$). The dashed line marks $OR = 1.00$.

reduced awareness of signs and symptoms of mild stroke, as well as changes in workplace relations. Interestingly, ICU admissions for hemorrhagic stroke were not reduced during the pandemic as compared with previous years.

In contrast to previous reports, we were not able to demonstrate a higher severity of stroke in 2020, as measured by the need for mechanical ventilation or presentation with altered mental status. Other studies evaluated ischemic stroke severity using more specific measures, such as increased NIHSS or more frequent need of mechanical thrombectomy for large vessel occlusion, which were unavailable in our database.^{1,3,20} In patients with hemorrhagic stroke, data are also conflicting. As opposed to our findings of no changes in either volume of hospitalizations or severity of stroke

during the pandemic, previous studies have shown increases in hemorrhagic stroke rates and milder clinical presentations,^{21,22} whereas a population-based study in Brazil also found no differences during the pandemic compared with previous years.²⁰

Despite unchanged neurological severity for both ischemic and hemorrhagic stroke hospitalizations in 2020 as compared with previous years, our study found an interruption in the trend of improved hospital outcomes observed from 2011 to 2019. For ischemic stroke, adjusted mortality rates in 2020 were worse than those observed in the previous 3 years. This effect was seen across all age groups up to 80 years. For hemorrhagic stroke, in-hospital mortality increased in 2020 only in those younger than 50 years. Moreover, when analyzing patients with or without altered mental

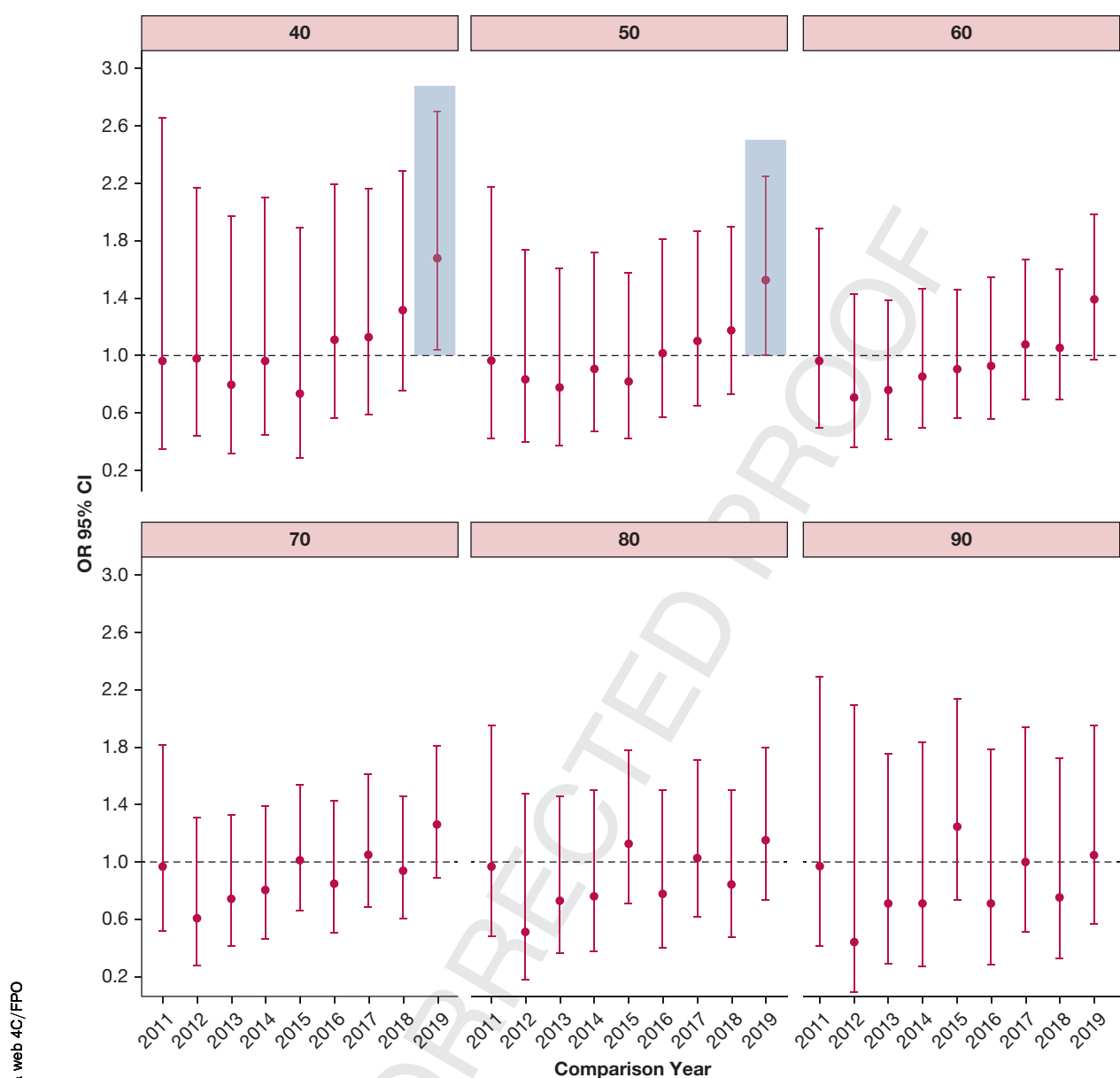


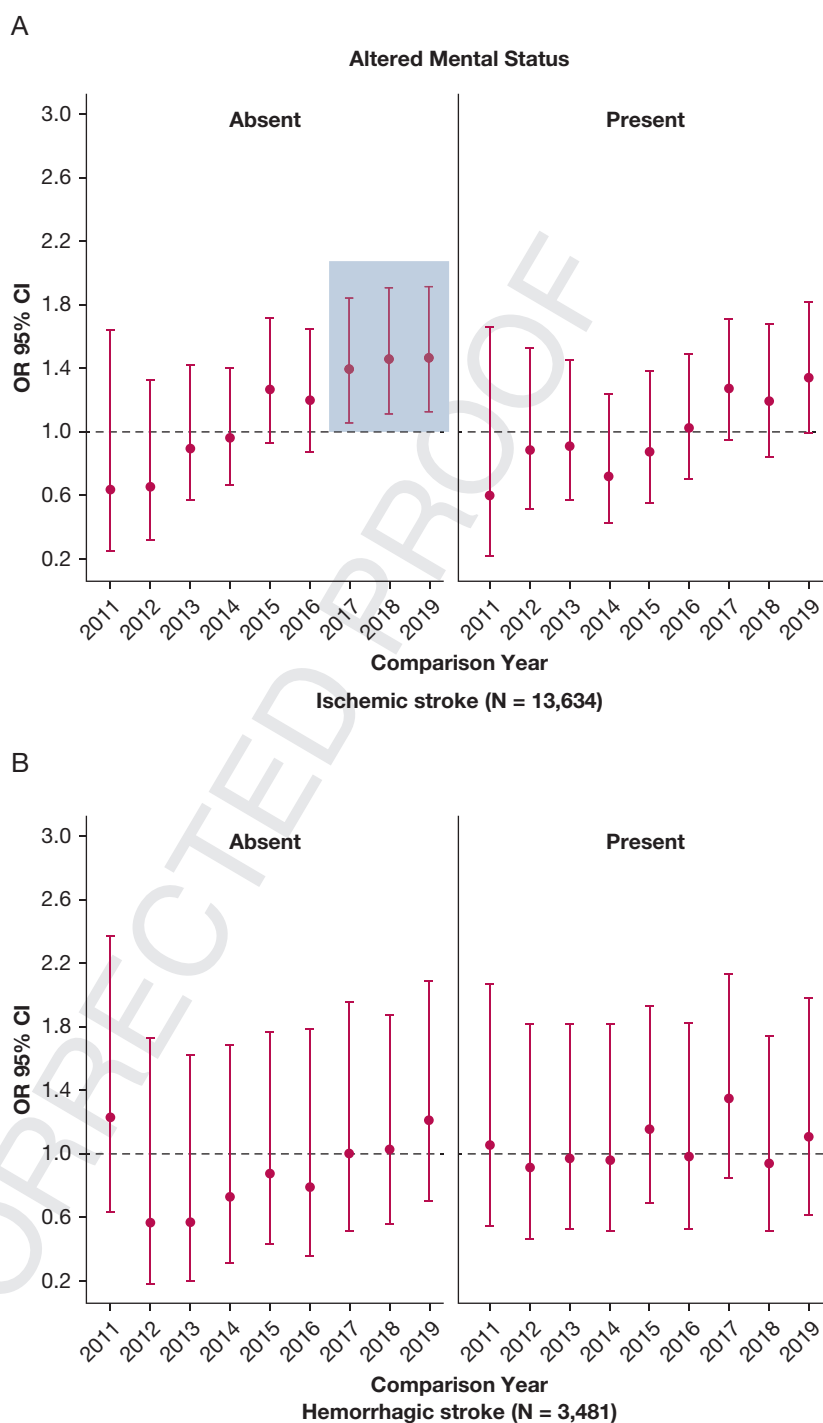
Figure 5 – OR and their corresponding 95% CIs for mortality in 2020 vs other years (references in x-axis) for fixed age (panels) obtained through marginal means, in patients with hemorrhagic stroke ($n = 3,481$). The dashed line marks $OR = 1.00$.

status, comparative mortality increases during the pandemic were seen only in those admitted for ischemic stroke with preserved consciousness. These data suggest that the impact of the pandemic on hospital outcomes was more pronounced among patients with less severe stroke. We can hypothesize that several unmeasured factors such as late hospital referral, disruption of stroke care organization, increased ICU strain, and reduced adherence to processes of care and clinical stroke protocols may have been associated with increased morbidity and mortality.²³ Regardless of the mechanistic pathway, it is reasonable to assume that COVID-19

impacted the outcome of critically ill stroke patients, perhaps resulting in excess deaths. Therefore, solely considering COVID-19 admissions as a measurement of the impact of the pandemic may underestimate its effect on patients with a different diagnosis.

Our study has some limitations. First, our database did not provide stroke-specific data to evaluate neurological severity and interventions, such as reperfusion therapies implemented, onset-to-treatment, and door-to-imaging times. Second, no postdischarge functional evaluation was performed, which is a commonly used outcome

991 Figure 6 – OR and their corresponding 95% CIs
 992 for mortality in 2020 vs other years (references
 993 in x-axis) for the presence or absence of altered
 994 mental status obtained through marginal
 995 means, in patients with ischemic (A, n =
 996 13,604) and hemorrhagic stroke (b, n = 3,477).
 997 The dashed line marks OR = 1.00.



1037 after stroke. Third, the VLAD analysis used SAPS 3 to
 1038 calculate the probability of dying in the hospital.
 1039 Although validation of this measure for stroke are
 1040 limited, we did not have other disease-specific scales
 1041 available. In addition, we acknowledge that our results
 1042 were sensitive to corrections for multiple hypotheses and
 1043 therefore should be seen as exploratory. Finally, we were
 1044 not able to analyze structure and organizational hospital
 1045

1046 data that could contribute to a better understanding of
 1047 the disruption caused by the pandemic and the potential
 1048 consequences in patient outcomes.
 1049

1092 Interpretation

1093 Our study found a reduction in ICU admissions with
 1094 stroke during the first year of the pandemic in the largest
 1095

hospital network in Latin America. We also demonstrated an interruption in the trend of improved outcomes observed in the past years up to 2019, with an increase in adjusted mortality in 2020. This effect was more pronounced during the surge of ICU admissions for COVID-19 and affected predominantly patients with ischemic stroke without coma, and young patients with hemorrhagic stroke.

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