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# Pros and Cons of Noninferiority Trials: The Case of CVOT in CKD-Anemia

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Baylor  
College of  
Medicine

# Disclosure Slide

- I am NOT a trial statistician
- Salary mostly supported from federal grants
- Balance of salary from clinical work and endowed Gordon A. Cain Chair in Nephrology
- Advisory Boards/Consultancies (Akebia/Otsuka, AstraZeneca, Bayer, GlaxoSmithKline, Janssen, Merck, Pharmacosmos, Reata, Relypsa)
- Associate Editor, *JAMA* (stipend)
- Co-Chair, Kidney Disease: Improving Global Outcomes (unpaid)

**JAMA** The Journal of the  
American Medical Association

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# History of CKD-Anemia Treatment

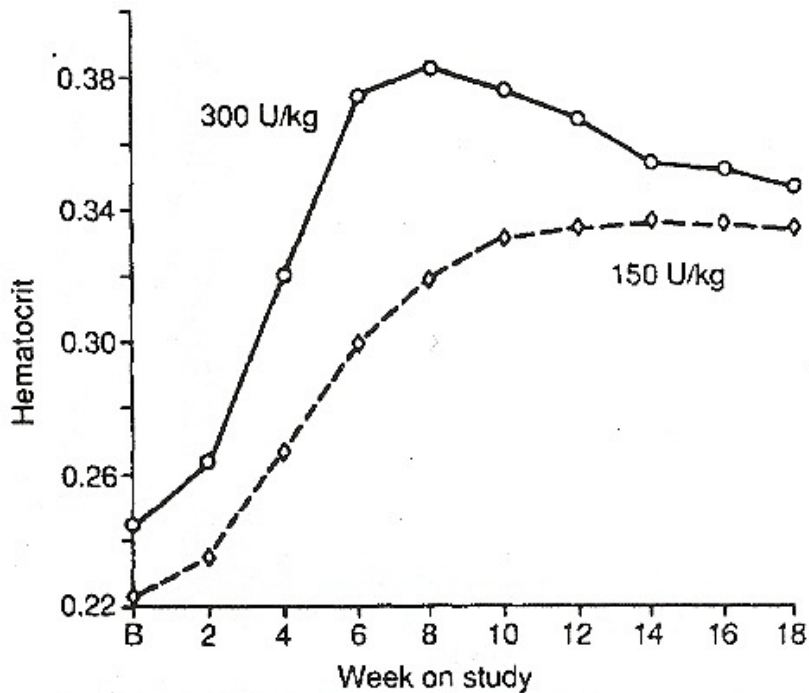
- 1906: existence of *hémopoiétine* postulated (Paul Carnot)
- 1948: termed “*erythropoietin*” by Eva Bonsdorff and Eeva Jalavisto (*Acta Physiol Scand* 1948; 16:150-170)
- 1968: Goldwasser & Kung purified EPO from sheep urine; succeeded after 9 years (1977)
- 1970s: John Adamson and Joseph W. Eschbach established clinical potential
- 1985: EPO gene isolated and cloned (Jacobs; Lin)
- rhEPO synthesis patented at Columbia University and licensed to Amgen

# History of CKD-Anemia Treatment

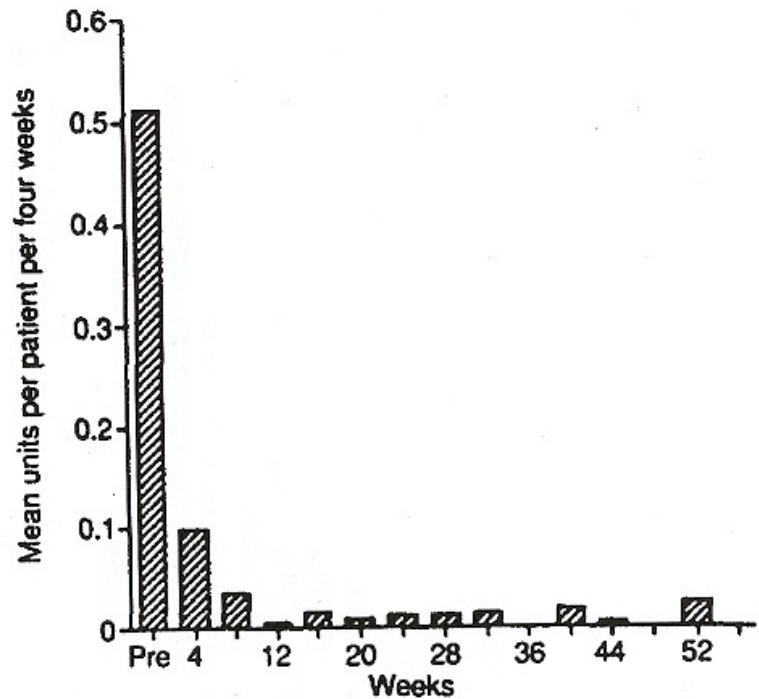
## Recombinant human erythropoetin

- Eschbach et al: *NEJM* 1987; 316:73 (Phase I-II)
- Eschbach et al: *Ann Intern Med* 1989; 111:992
  - Phase III study – single arm evaluation
    - 333 patients on maintenance hemodialysis
    - In: Hematocrit <0.30; clinically stable; iron replete
    - Out: poorly controlled hypertension (dBP>100 mmHg)
    - Starting dose of 300 (150) U/kg
    - Titrate dose to target hematocrit 0.32-0.38

# Recombinant human erythropoietin



**Figure 1.** The mean hematocrit values at biweekly intervals for 35 patients receiving 300 U rHuEpo/kg body weight (*circles*) or 201 patients receiving 150 U (*diamonds*) rHuEpo/kg. The rHuEpo was given intravenously three times per week.



**Figure 2.** Transfusion requirements (*units/patient*) per month for 6 months before initiation of rHuEpo therapy (*pre*) and at 4-week intervals thereafter. At week 52, one patient autodonated three units in the previous month for elective hip surgery.

# Recombinant human erythropoietin

## Other desired outcomes:

Reduced iron overload (ferritin: 962 → 628 µg/L; TSAT: 41 → 30%)

Significant improvements (observed up to 10 months) in

- physical functioning (Karnowsky),
- activity level,
- energy level
- Nottingham health profile scores

## Adverse events (within 3 months):

Increase in BP (35% had dBp increased by >10 mmHg or required increase in antihypertensive medications)

Seizures (5.4%)

Iron deficiency (43% developed ferritin <30 µg/L or TSAT <20%)

# Recombinant human erythropoietin

Value proposition:

- reduction of transfusion rates (shown),
- improvement of hrQoL (maybe)
- reduction in CV morbidity/mortality (proposed),
- [reduction in immune-sensitization of kidney transplant candidates (suggested much later)]

US FDA approved epoetin alfa on June 1, 1989

# Anemia Targets and CV Outcomes

Testing the hypothesis that treating anemia (using ESAs) more aggressively improves hard (cardiovascular) endpoints.

Using superiority trial designs

H<sub>0</sub>: Treatments A and B (or placebo) yield outcomes that are statistically not different

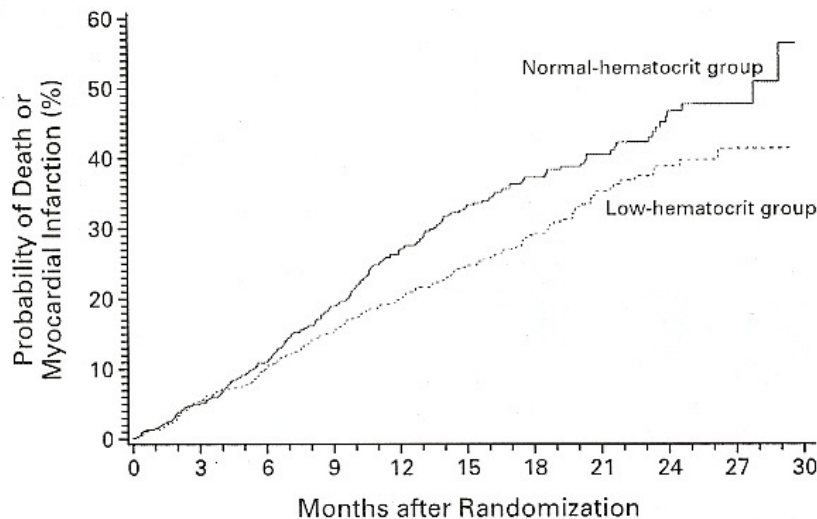
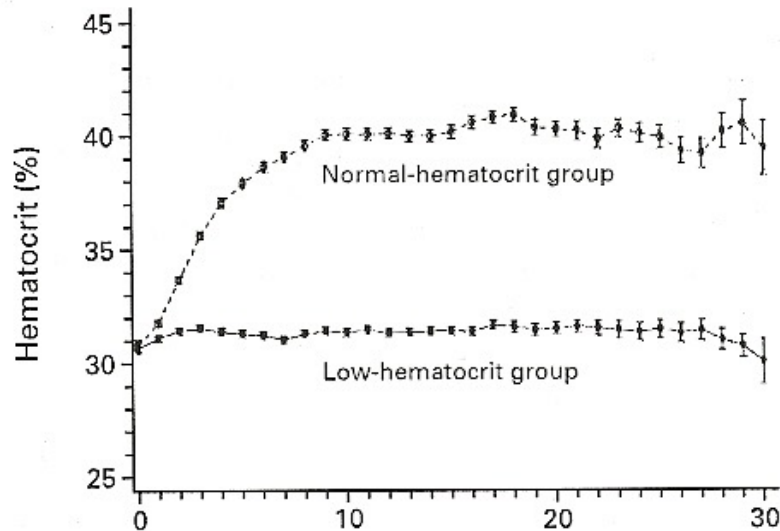
H<sub>A</sub>: Treatment A yields better (or worse) outcomes than Treatment B (placebo) at a statistical significance threshold, usually  $p < 0.05$



# Anemia Targets and CV Outcomes

- “Normal hematocrit study”
- 1233 patients, HD, w/ CHF or IHD
- Randomized to hematocrit target 0.30 vs. 0.42
- Primary endpoint: death or nonfatal MI

# Anemia Targets and CV Outcomes



Stopped early for futility.

RR: 1.3 (95% CI: 0.9-1.9)

Increased risk of HD vascular access thrombosis in normal-hematocrit group (39% vs. 29%;  $p < 0.001$ ).

Besarab A., et al: *NEJM* 1998; 339:584

# Anemia Targets and CV Outcomes

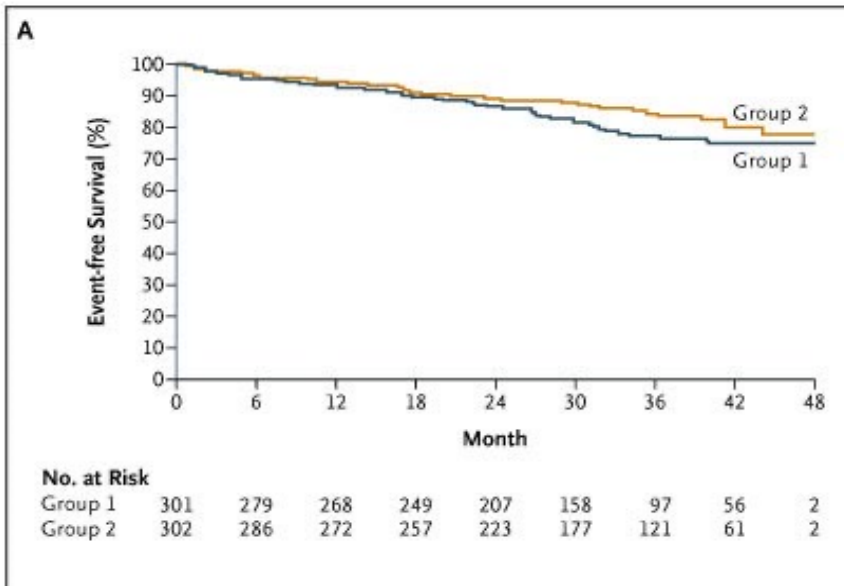
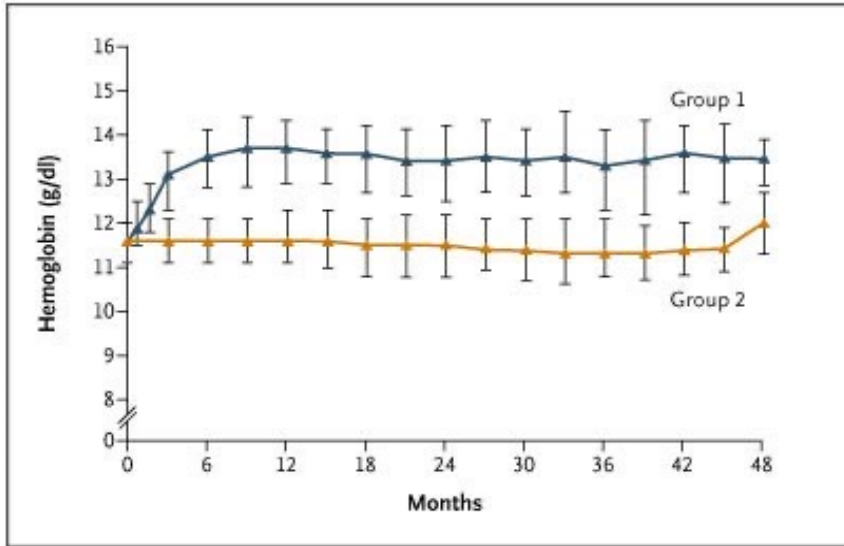
Cardiovascular Risk Reduction by Early Anemia Treatment with Epoetin Beta – CREATE

603 patients w/ CKD eGFR 15-35 mL/min/1.73 m<sup>2</sup>

Randomized to hemoglobin target of 11-12.5 vs. 13-15 g/dL

Primary endpoint: composite CV endpoint (sudden death, MI, stroke/TIA, acute HF, hospitalized arrhythmia, hospitalized angina, PVD w/ necrosis or requiring amputation)

# Anemia Targets and CV Outcomes



Primary CV Composite:  
 HR, 0.78; 95% CI, 0.53 to 1.14;  
 adjusted P = 0.20  
 Results robust when censoring  
 for initiation of dialysis.

Drueke et al. *NEJM* 2006; 335:2071

# Anemia Targets and CV Outcomes

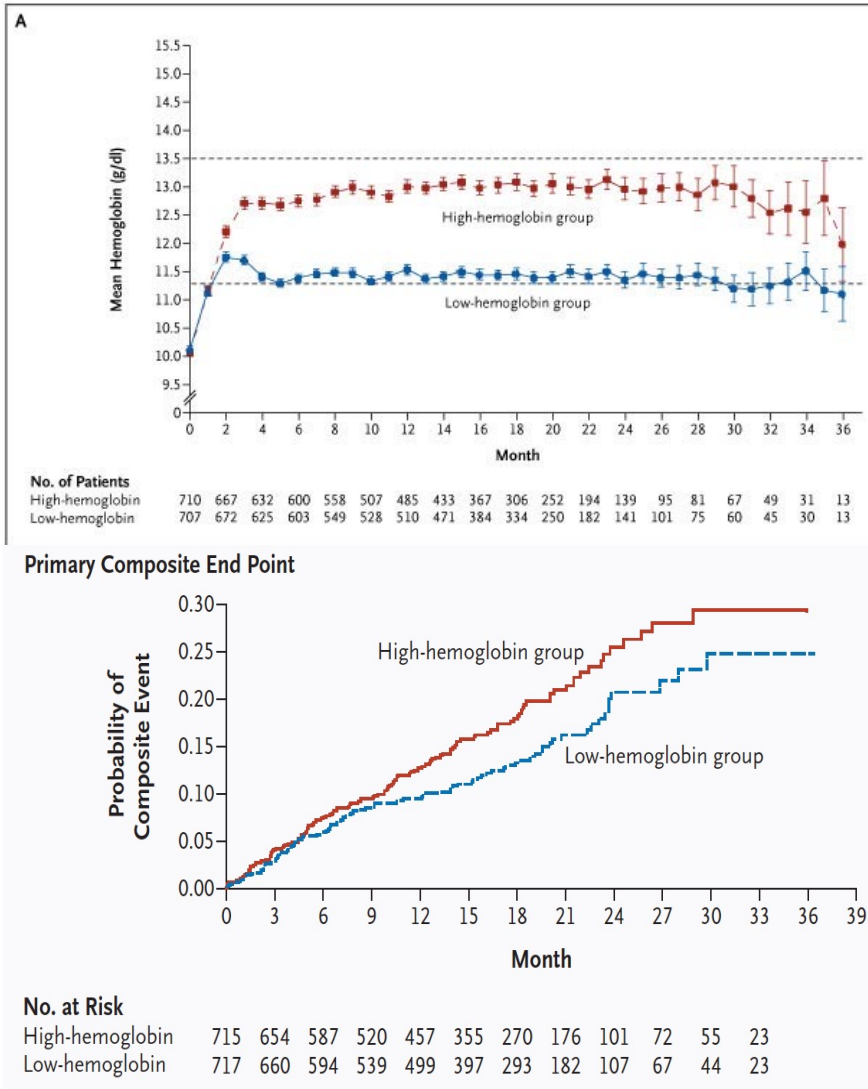
Correction of Hemoglobin and Outcomes in Renal Insufficiency – CHOIR

1432 patients w/ CKD eGFR 15-50 mL/min/1.73 m<sup>2</sup>

Randomized to hemoglobin target of 10.5-11 vs. 13-13.5 g/dL (amended to 11.3 vs. 13.5 g/dL)

Primary endpoint: composite CV endpoint (death, MI, stroke, hospitalization for heart failure).

# Anemia Targets and CV Outcomes



Stopped early for lack of conditional power.  
 Primary CV Composite:  
 HR, 1.34; 95% CI, 1.03 to 1.74;  
 P = 0.03

# Regulatory Action

**BLACK BOX**

# Regulatory Action

- Black Box (9/3/2007) and other label updates
- CRDAC (9/11/2007)
  - Voted against market withdrawal for epoetin alfa and darbepoetin alfa (approved in 2001)
  - Deferred any recommendation for action until data from ongoing TREAT would be available
- Quiet (?) shift in approach by FDA towards additional requirements for innovators in CKD anemia space
  - Registrational evidence solely focusing on anemia treatment/control no longer sufficient (inference)
  - CVOTs now appear required for NDAs in CKD-anemia (at least broadly for ESAs; apparently not for iron treatments)



# Anemia **Treatment** and CV Outcomes

Trial to Reduce Cardiovascular Events with Aranesp Therapy – TREAT (darbepoetin alfa)

4038 patients w/ CKD (eGFR 20-60 mL/min/1.73 m<sup>2</sup>), type 2 DM, anemia (hemoglobin <10.5 g/dL)

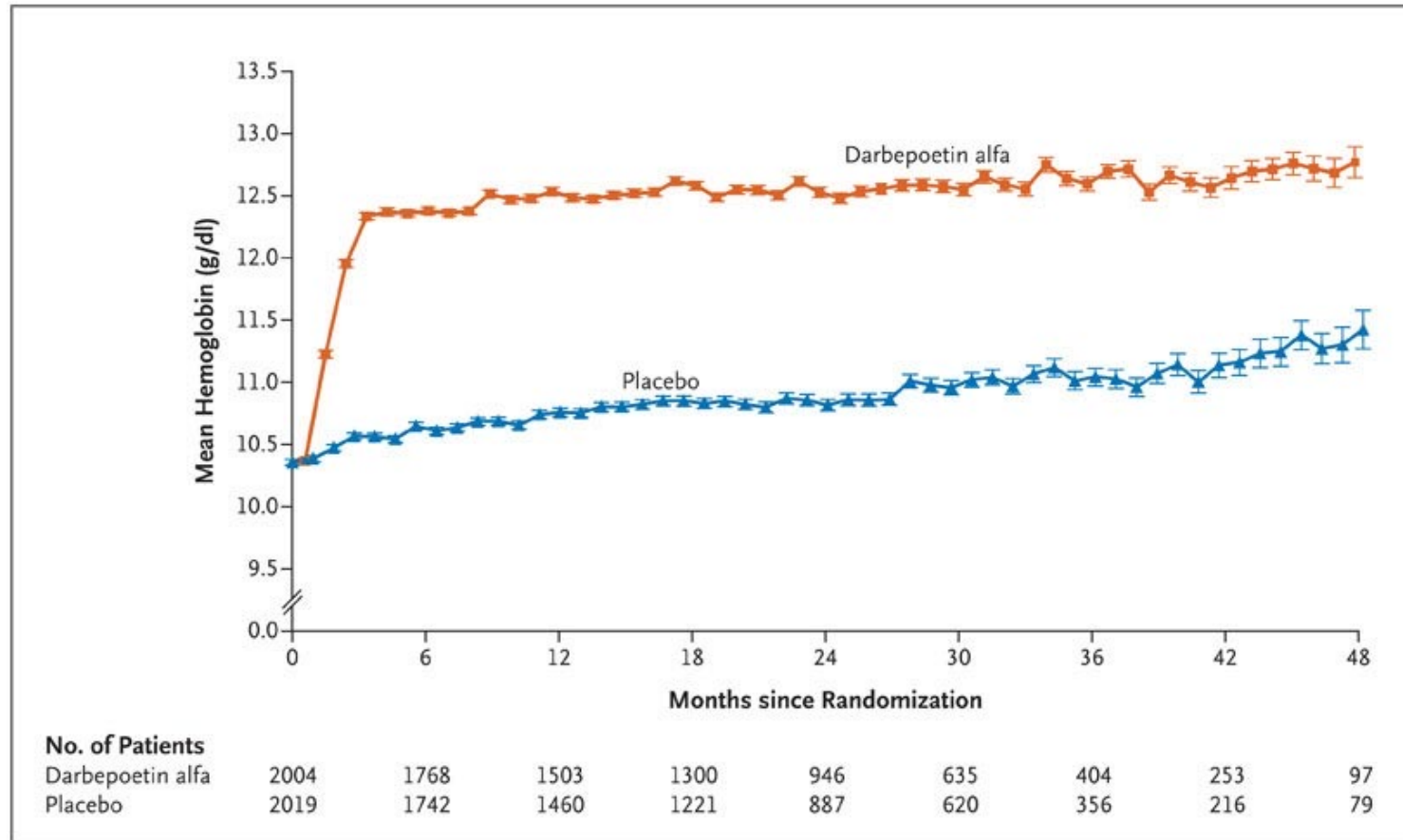
Randomized to darbepoetin treatment w/ target of 13 g/dL vs. placebo w/ rescue at hemoglobin <9 g/dL

Co-primary endpoints:

A) composite CV endpoint (death, stroke, HF, MI, hospitalized myocardial ischemia);

B) death or time to renal replacement therapy

# Anemia Treatment and CV Outcomes



# Anemia Treatment and CV Outcomes

**Table 2. Composite and Component End Points.\***

End Point	Darbepoetin Alfa (N=2012)	Placebo (N=2026)	Hazard Ratio (95% CI)	P Value†
	<i>number (percent)</i>			
<b>Primary end points</b>				
Cardiovascular composite end point‡	632 (31.4)	602 (29.7)	1.05 (0.94–1.17)	0.41
Death from any cause	412 (20.5)	395 (19.5)	1.05 (0.92–1.21)	0.48
Myocardial infarction§	124 (6.2)	129 (6.4)	0.96 (0.75–1.22)	0.73
Stroke§	101 (5.0)	53 (2.6)	1.92 (1.38–2.68)	<0.001
Heart failure§	205 (10.2)	229 (11.3)	0.89 (0.74–1.08)	0.24
Myocardial ischemia	41 (2.0)	49 (2.4)	0.84 (0.55–1.27)	0.40
Renal composite end point (ESRD or death)	652 (32.4)	618 (30.5)	1.06 (0.95–1.19)	0.29
ESRD	338 (16.8)	330 (16.3)	1.02 (0.87–1.18)	0.83
<b>Additional adjudicated end points</b>				
Death from cardiovascular causes	259 (12.9)	250 (12.3)	1.05 (0.88–1.25)	0.61
Cardiac revascularization	84 (4.2)	117 (5.8)	0.71 (0.54–0.94)	0.02

\* ESRD denotes end-stage renal disease.

† P values have not been adjusted for multiple comparisons.

‡ A patient may have had multiple cardiovascular events of different types. The cardiovascular composite end point reflects only the first occurrence of any of the components.

§ This category includes both fatal and nonfatal events.

# Anemia Treatment and CV Outcomes

- TREAT was the first placebo-controlled CVOT for an ESA to treat CKD-anemia
  - Superiority design (failed to reject the  $H_0$ )
  - Lots of regulatory response (not covered today)
- Subsequent trials of INDs used non-inferiority designs
  - Paradigm shift
  - Design insufficiently understood by many

# Noninferiority Trials

- Test whether a Treatment A is not unacceptably worse relative to an outcome of interest compared with a Treatment B.
  - “The intent of an NI trial, however, is not to show that the new drug is equivalent, but rather that it is not materially worse than the control.” -- FDA
  - Do not *per se* determine better or worse

# Superiority vs. Noninferiority Trials

Figure 1. Possible Results of a Placebo-Controlled Superiority Study (Point Estimate and 95% Confidence Interval (CI))

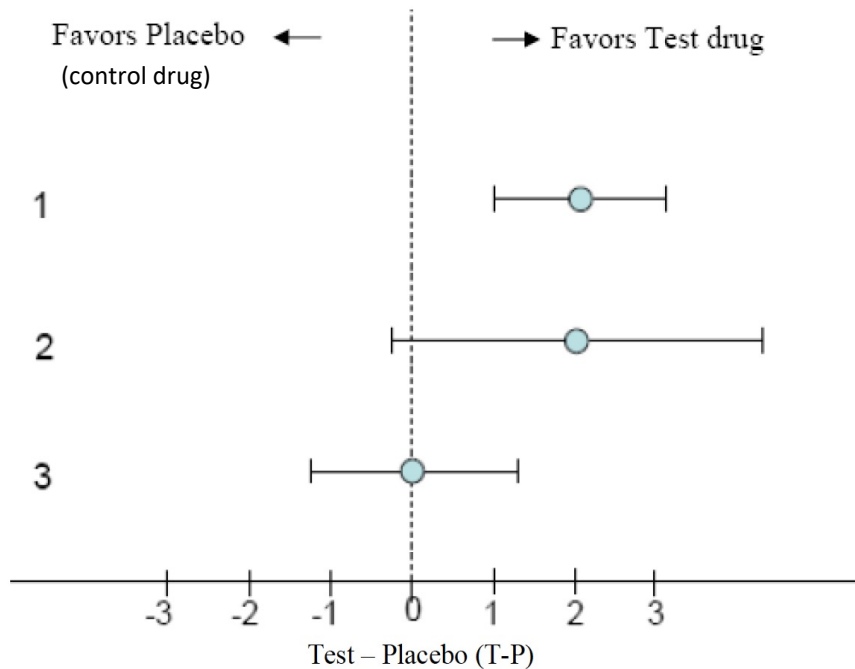
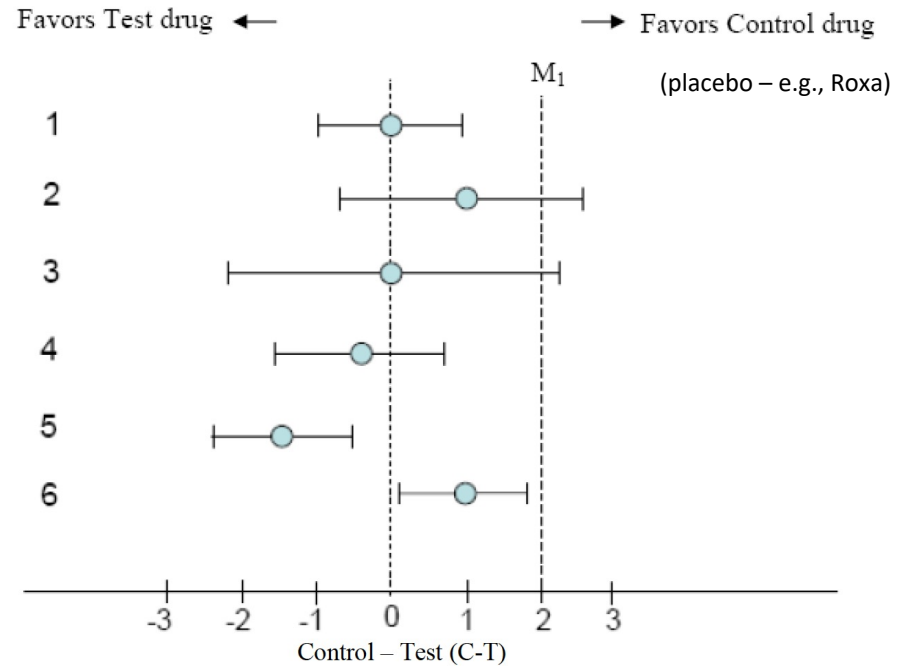
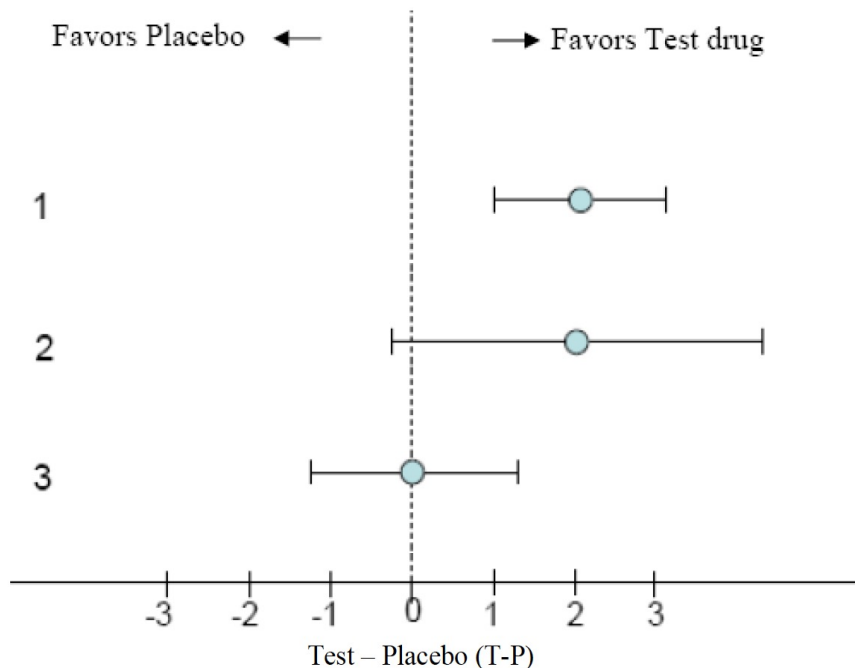


Figure 2. Possible Results of an NI Study Showing Control Drug-Test Drug Differences (Point Estimate and 95% CI)



# Superiority vs. Noninferiority Trials

Figure 1. Possible Results of a Placebo-Controlled Superiority Study  
(Point Estimate and 95% Confidence Interval (CI))



- Superiority trials are straightforward to interpret.
- The null value is fixed
- Rejection of  $H_0$  and acceptance of  $H_A$  if  $p < 0.05$ .
- Biases limited and usually towards the null (conservative bias).

# Superiority vs. Noninferiority Trials

Figure 1. Possible Results of a Placebo-Controlled Superiority Study (Point Estimate and 95% Confidence Interval (CI))

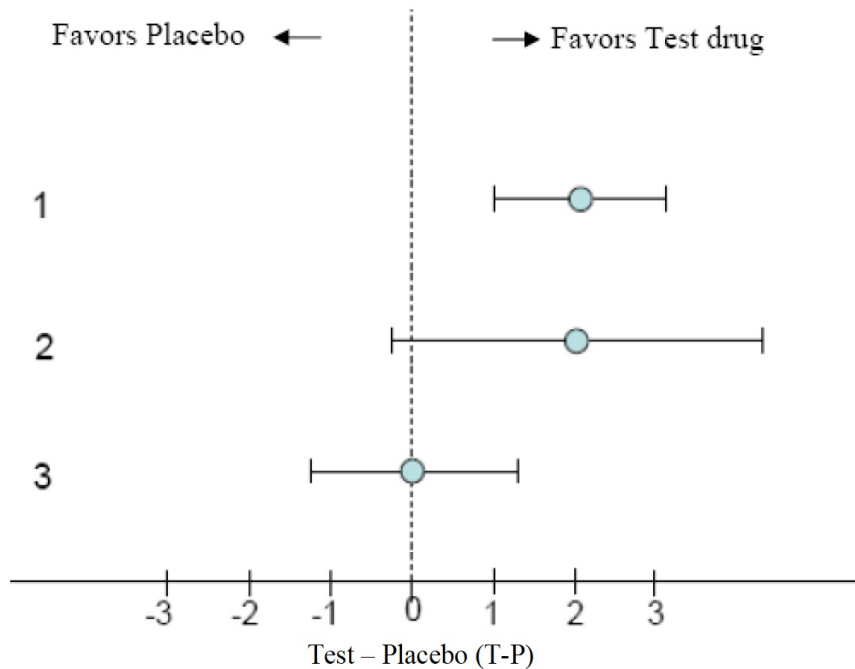
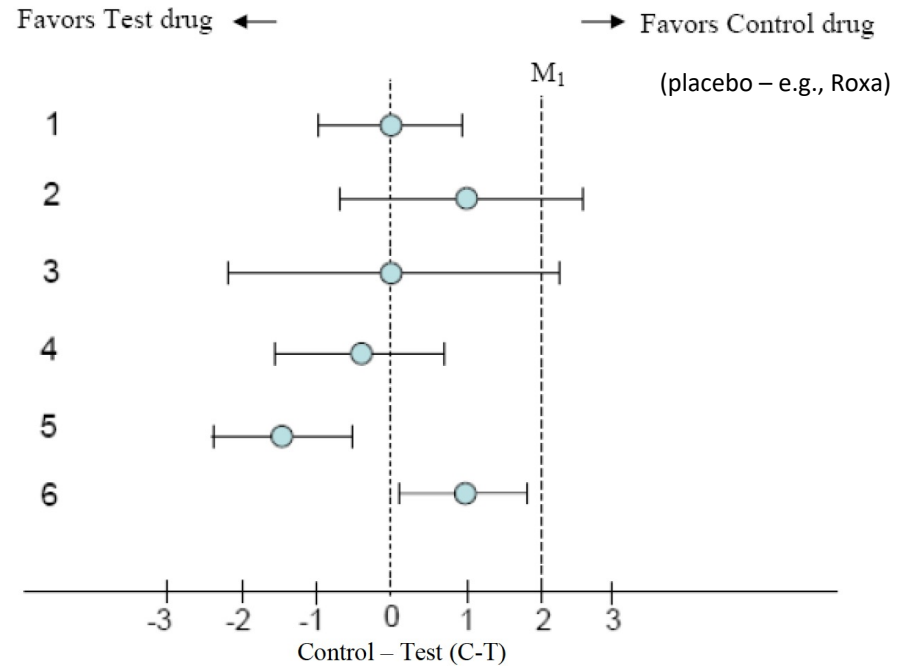


Figure 2. Possible Results of an NI Study Showing Control Drug-Test Drug Differences (Point Estimate and 95% CI)

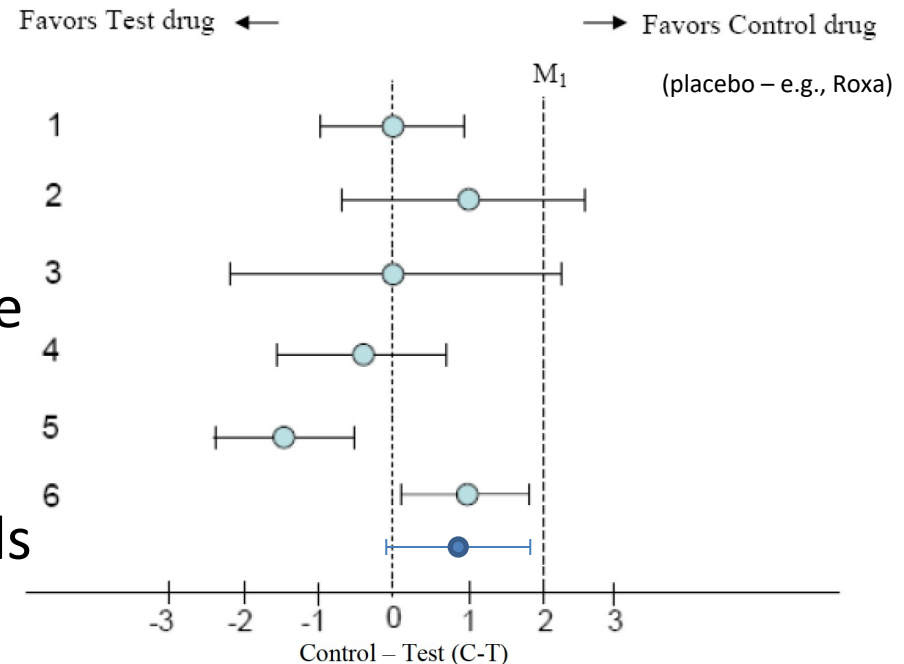




# Superiority vs. **Noninferiority** Trials

- Noninferiority trials are not straightforward to interpret.
- How to determine the noninferiority margin,  $M_1$ ?
- Noninferiority  $p < 0.05$  (95% CI does not cross  $M_1$ ) needs to be interpreted in light of key assumptions.
- Biases usually directed towards increased likelihood of (inappropriately) accepting noninferiority (nonconservative bias).

Figure 2. Possible Results of an NI Study Showing Control Drug–Test Drug Differences (Point Estimate and 95% CI)



# Superiority vs. Noninferiority Trials

Example 1: Inclusion of types of events that cannot plausibly be affected by treatment.

E.g., accidental death (MVA, GS, drug overdose, brick falling from roof)

Question for today: might anemia treatment A vs. B reduce accidental death? (Not plausibly)

Impact of inclusion of accidental death in composite endpoint (remember -- occurs at similar rates in both arms):

Superiority trial: fewer events that might be affected by treatment get counted => dilution of power, effect estimate pulled towards the null (not desirable for anyone; conservative bias ↑ false negative conclusion).

Noninferiority trial: fewer events that might be affected by treatment get counted => augmentation of power, effect estimate, CI get pulled towards the null (not desirable for some; non-conservative bias; ↑ false positive conclusion).

# Superiority vs. Noninferiority Trials

Example 2: Inclusion of timing of events that cannot plausibly be affected by treatment.

E.g., including events long after treatment discontinuation or crossover

Question for today: might treatment A vs. B reduce (CV) events weeks or months after assigned treatment was discontinued? (Maybe? Or not?)

Impact of inclusion of (CV) events that occurred long after treatment discontinuation. What if this occurs at dissimilar rates between arms?

Superiority trial: fewer events get counted during time periods when a treatment effect is plausible => dilution of power, effect estimate pulled towards the null (not desirable for anyone, conservative bias, ↑ false negative conclusion).

Noninferiority trial: fewer events get counted during time periods when there is a plausible treatment effect => augmentation of power, effect estimate pulled towards the null (not desirable, non-conservative bias; ↑ false positive conclusion).

# Superiority vs. Noninferiority Trials

What if discontinuation rates are high and different between treatments?

Bad! But 'badder' for NI trials.

ITT a useful fix (and gold standard) for superiority trials

ITT not a fix for noninferiority trials.

On treatment? OT +7? OT +28?

A close-up, low-angle shot of a baseball. The white, pebbled leather of the ball's surface is the primary focus, with the red stitching curving across the frame from the bottom right towards the top left. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the leather and the individual stitches against a dark, almost black background.

Back to Anemia Trials

# Peginesatide

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Peginesatide in Patients with Anemia Undergoing Hemodialysis

Steven Fishbane, M.D., Brigitte Schiller, M.D., Francesco Locatelli, M.D., Adrian C. Covic, M.D., Ph.D., Robert Provenzano, M.D., Andrzej Wiecek, M.D., Ph.D., Nathan W. Levin, M.D., Mark Kaplan, M.D., Iain C. Macdougall, M.D., Carol Francisco, Ph.D., Martha R. Mayo, Pharm.D., Krishna R. Polu, M.D., et al., for the EMERALD Study Groups\*

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Peginesatide for Anemia in Patients with Chronic Kidney Disease Not Receiving Dialysis

Iain C. Macdougall, M.D., Robert Provenzano, M.D., Amit Sharma, M.D., Bruce S. Spinowitz, M.D., Rebecca J. Schmidt, D.O., Pablo E. Pergola, M.D., Ph.D., Raja I. Zabaneh, M.D., Sandra Tong-Starksen, M.D., Martha R. Mayo, Pharm.D., Hong Tang, M.S., Krishna R. Polu, M.D., Anne-Marie Duliege, M.D., et al., for the PEARL Study Groups\*

CV Composite: death, MI, stroke, HF, angina, arrhythmia

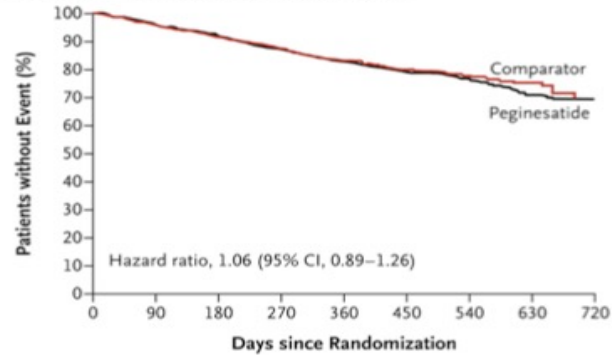
M<sub>1</sub>: HR=1.3

*N Engl J Med* 2013; 368:307-319 and 320-332

# Peginesatide

EMERALD and PEARL pooled

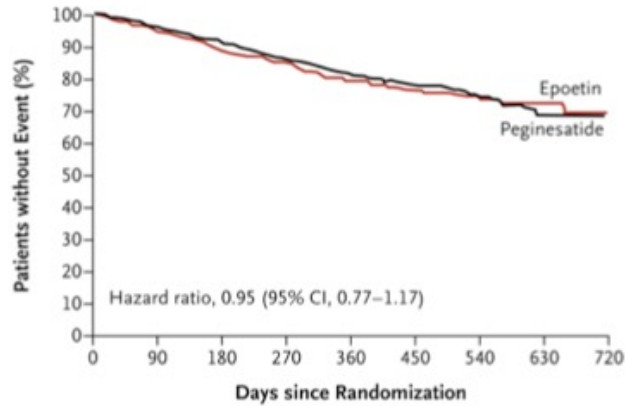
**A** Pooled EMERALD 1 and 2 and PEARL 1 and 2 Cohorts



No. at Risk	0	90	180	270	360	450	540	630	720
Peginesatide	1722	1608	1497	1388	1288	919	473	187	28
Comparator	869	812	767	716	665	459	254	111	16

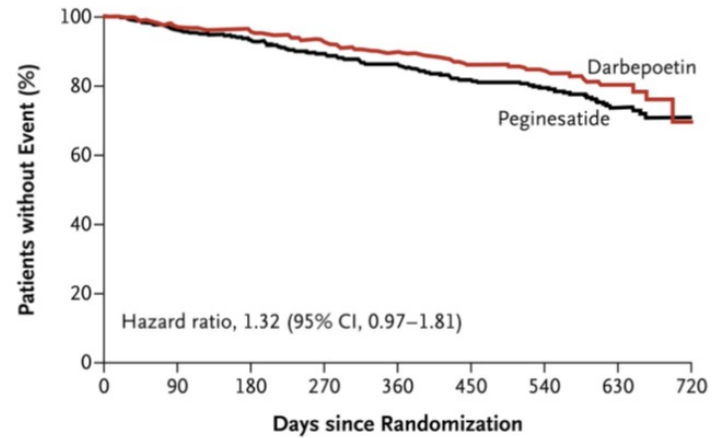
EMERALD pooled

**B** EMERALD 1 and 2 Cohorts



No. at Risk	0	90	180	270	360	450	540	630	720
Peginesatide	1066	991	914	845	776	519	201	78	16
Epoetin	542	502	466	429	392	241	112	57	12

PEARL pooled



No. at Risk	0	90	180	270	360	450	540	630	720
Peginesatide	656	617	583	543	512	400	272	109	12
Darbepoetin	327	310	301	287	273	218	142	54	4

# Peginesatide

- FDA approved 3/26/2012, for CKD on dialysis
- Broad rollout of the drug in the FMC-NA dialysis network in the fall of 2012

CORRESPONDENCE [FREE PREVIEW](#)

## Anaphylaxis and Hypotension after Administration of Peginesatide

This letter describes serious adverse events (three fatal cardiorespiratory arrests and two grade 4 anaphylaxis and hypotension events) related to the administration of peginesatide during surveillance in patients undergoing dialysis. As a result, the drug was removed from the market.

May 22, 2014

N Engl J Med 2014; 370:2055-2056

DOI: 10.1056/NEJMc1400883

Print Subscriber? [Activate your online access.](#)

*N Engl J Med* 2014; 370:2055-2056



# Roxadustat

FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION (FDA)  
Center for Drug Evaluation and Research (CDER)

*Cardiovascular and Renal Drugs Advisory Committee (CRDAC) Meeting*  
July 15, 2021

## DRAFT AGENDA

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*The committee will discuss new drug application 213805, for the hypoxia inducible factor prolyl hydroxylase inhibitor, roxadustat tablets, submitted by FibroGen, Inc., for the treatment of anemia due to chronic kidney disease in adult*

## **Roxadustat (FG-4592) for the Treatment of Anemia in Patients with Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD)**

July 15, 2021

FibroGen

Cardiovascular and Renal Drugs Advisory Committee

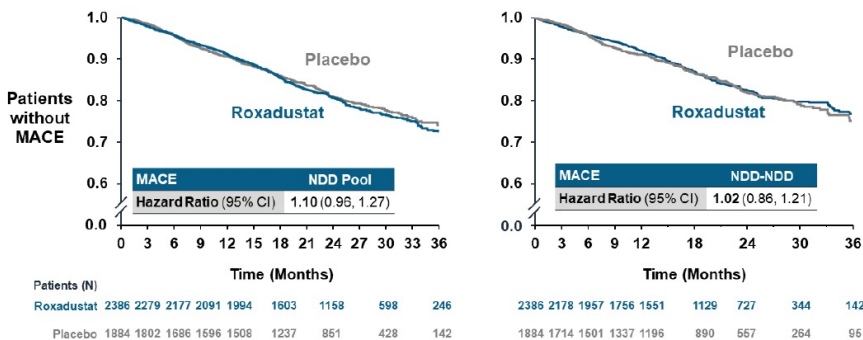
CV Composite: death, MI, stroke

$M_1: HR_{FDA} = N.D.; HR_{EMA} = 1.3$

# Roxadustat

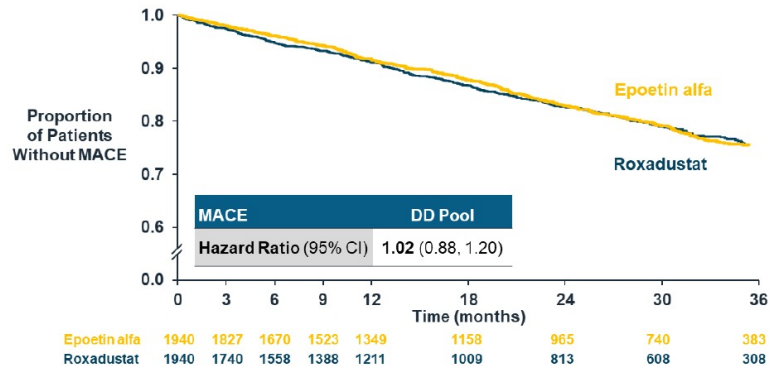
CO-71

## NDD and NDD-NDD (Censored at Dialysis): MACE Comparable for Roxadustat and Placebo



CO-77

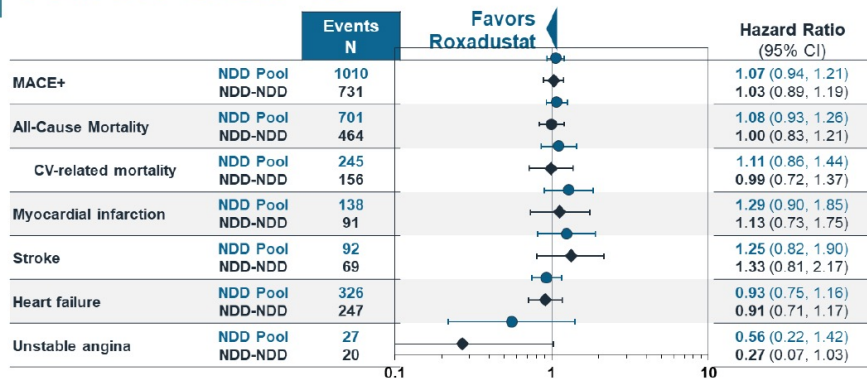
## DD: Proportion of Patients Without MACE Comparable Between Groups



OT+7: On-Treatment and within 7 days of last dose of study medication  
DD Pool: Studies 002, 063, 064

CO-72

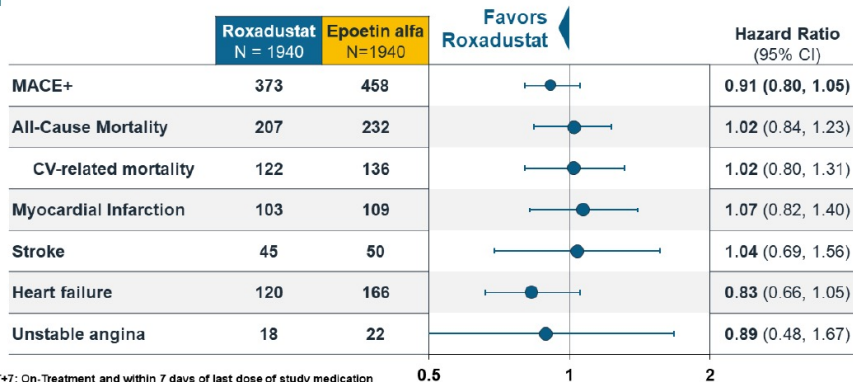
## NDD and NDD-NDD: MACE+ and Components 95% CIs Cross 1.0



On-study analysis (Studies 001, 060, 068)  
\*Censored at dialysis initiation

CO-78

## DD: Incidence of MACE+ Components Comparable to Epoetin Alfa



OT+7: On-Treatment and within 7 days of last dose of study medication  
DD Pool: Studies 002, 063, 064

# FDA Committee Votes Against Approval of Roxadustat for Anemia of Chronic Kidney Disease

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 2021

The FDA's Cardiovascular and Renal Drugs Advisory Committee (CRDAC) has decided not to recommend the approval of roxadustat for the treatment of patients with chronic kidney disease-related anemia. The panel voted 13 to one against approving the treatment for patients who are not on dialysis and voted 12 to two against its approval for dialysis-dependent patients.

August 11, 2021  
7:29 AM CDT  
Last Updated 4 months ago

## Healthcare & Pharmaceuticals

# U.S. FDA declines to approve FibroGen's anemia drug

3 minute read

Reuters

## After FDA snub, EMA backs FibroGen, Astellas' roxadustat



Phil Taylor

August 20, 2021

**The EU regulator has approved FibroGen and Astellas Evrenzo for adults with anaemia caused by chronic kidney disease (CKD), just days after the FDA turned down the drug in the US.**

# Vadadustat

## Safety and Efficacy of Vadadustat for Anemia in Patients Undergoing Dialysis

K.-U. Eckardt, R. Agarwal, A. Aswad, A. Awad, G.A. Block, M.R. Bacci,  
Y.M.K. Farag, S. Fishbane, H. Hubert, A. Jardine, Z. Khawaja, M.J. Koury,  
B.J. Maroni, K. Matsushita, P.A. McCullough, E.F. Lewis, W. Luo, P.S. Parfrey,  
P. Pergola, M.J. Sarnak, B. Spinowitz, J. Tumlin, D.L. Vargo, K.A. Walters,  
W.C. Winkelmayr, J. Wittes, R. Zwiech, and G.M. Chertow

## Vadadustat in Patients with Anemia and Non-Dialysis- Dependent CKD

G.M. Chertow, P.E. Pergola, Y.M.K. Farag, R. Agarwal, S. Arnold, G. Bako, G.A. Block, S. Burke, F.P. Castillo,  
A.G. Jardine, Z. Khawaja, M.J. Koury, E.F. Lewis, T. Lin, W. Luo, B.J. Maroni, K. Matsushita, P.A. McCullough,  
P.S. Parfrey, P. Roy-Chaudhury, M.J. Sarnak, A. Sharma, B. Spinowitz, C. Tseng, J. Tumlin, D.L. Vargo, K.A. Walters,  
W.C. Winkelmayr, J. Wittes, and K.-U. Eckardt, for the PRO<sub>2</sub>TECT Study Group\*

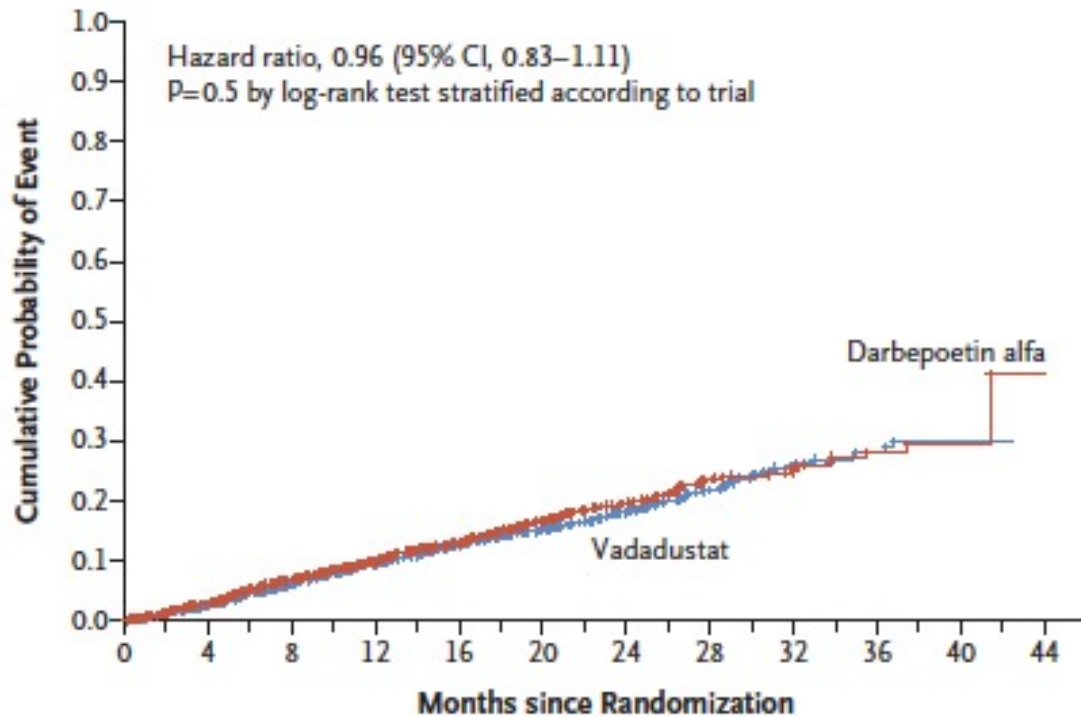
CV Composite: death, MI, stroke

M<sub>1</sub>: HR<sub>FDA</sub> = 1.25

*N Engl J Med 2021; 384:1601 and 384:1589*

# Vadadustat (CKD-DD)

## A MACE

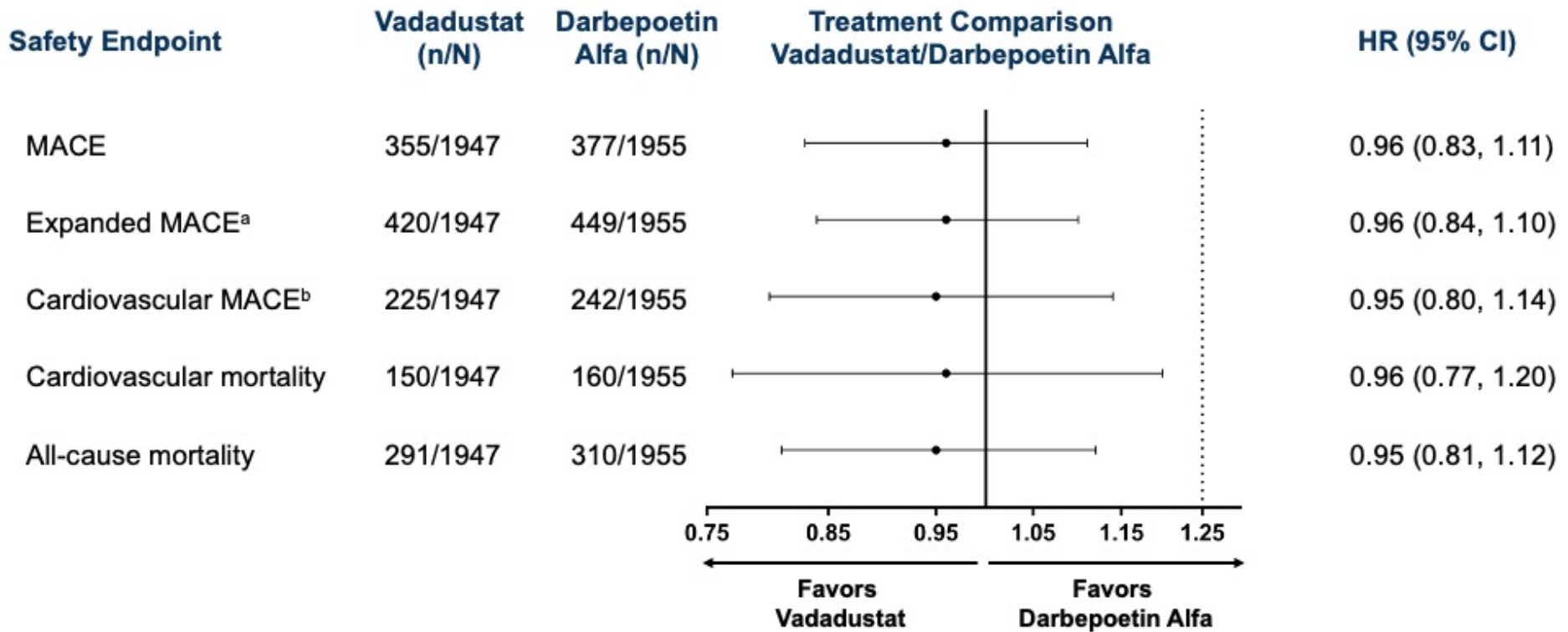


### No. at Risk

Vadadustat	1947	1881	1801	1615	1372	1040	711	491	262	89	6	0
Darbepoetin alfa	1955	1893	1807	1628	1393	1053	718	491	265	94	13	1

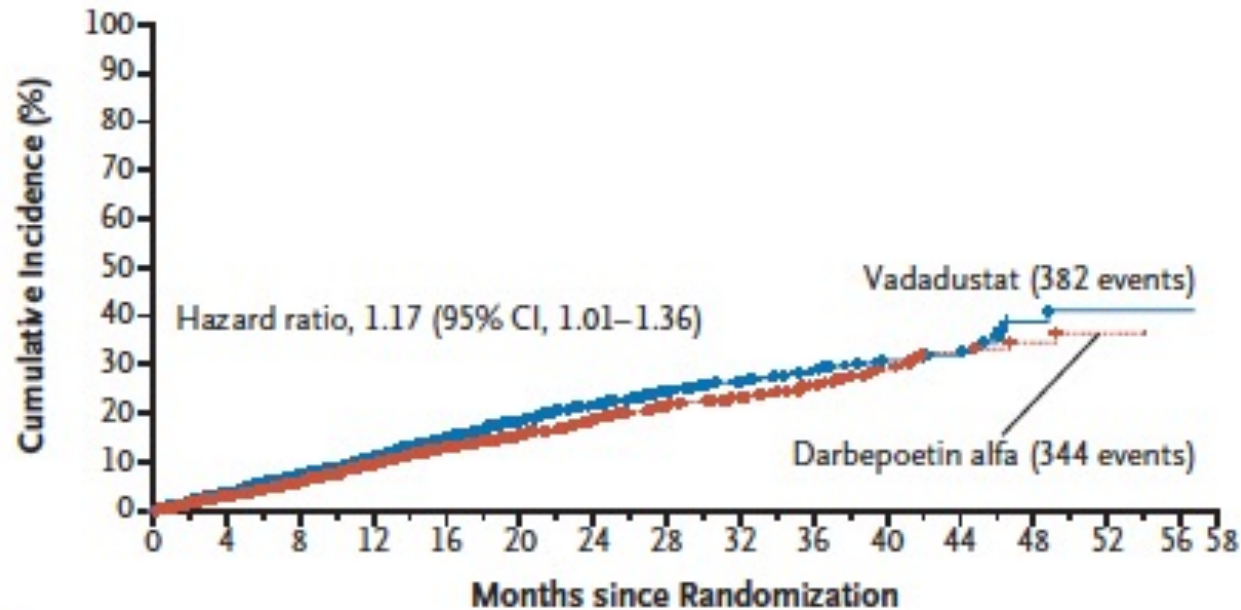
# Vadadustat (CKD-DD)

## INNO<sub>2</sub>VATE MACE, Expanded MACE & Other Safety Endpoints



# Vadadustat (CKD-NDD)

## A MACE

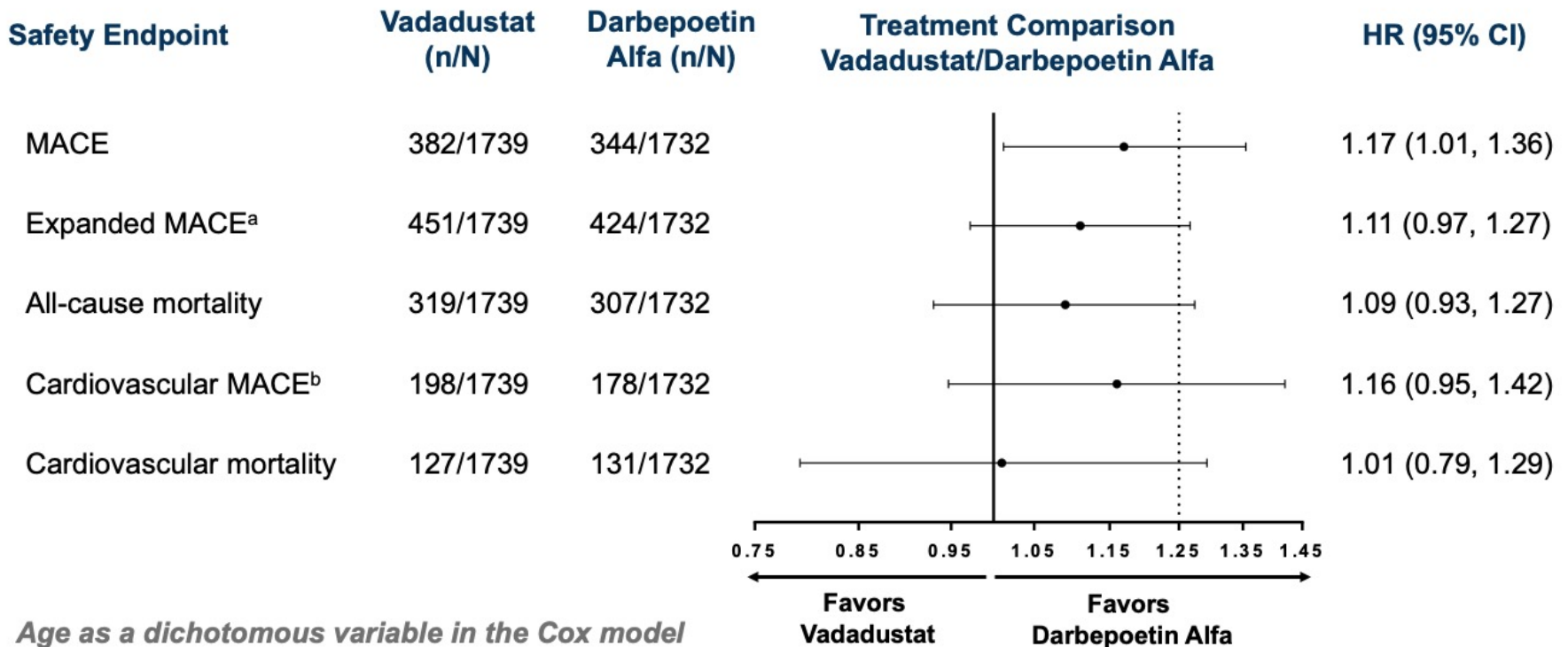


### No. at Risk

Vadadustat	1739	1668	1587	1301	1108	931	759	588	459	311	185	97	30	4	1	0
Darbepoetin alfa	1732	1674	1618	1329	1129	961	774	621	505	346	213	103	43	6	0	0

# Vadadustat (CKD-NDD)

## PRO<sub>2</sub>TECT MACE, Expanded MACE and other Safety Endpoints





# Daprodustat

## Daprodustat for the Treatment of Anemia in Patients Undergoing Dialysis

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## Daprodustat for the Treatment of Anemia in Patients Not Undergoing Dialysis

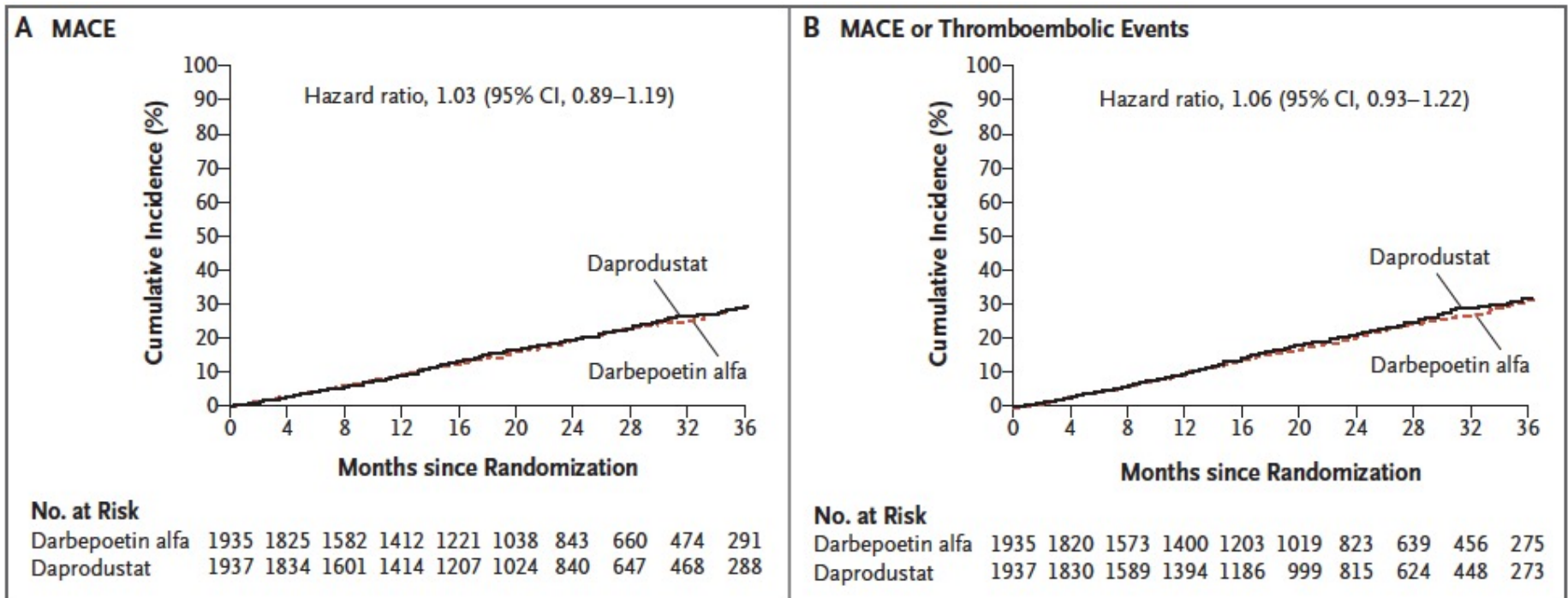
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CV Composite: death, MI, stroke

$M_1$ :  $HR_{FDA} = 1.20$  (amended to 1.25)

*N Engl J Med* 2021; DOI: 10.1056/NEJMoa2113379  
and DOI: 10.1056/NEJMoa2113380

# Daprodustat (CKD-NDD)

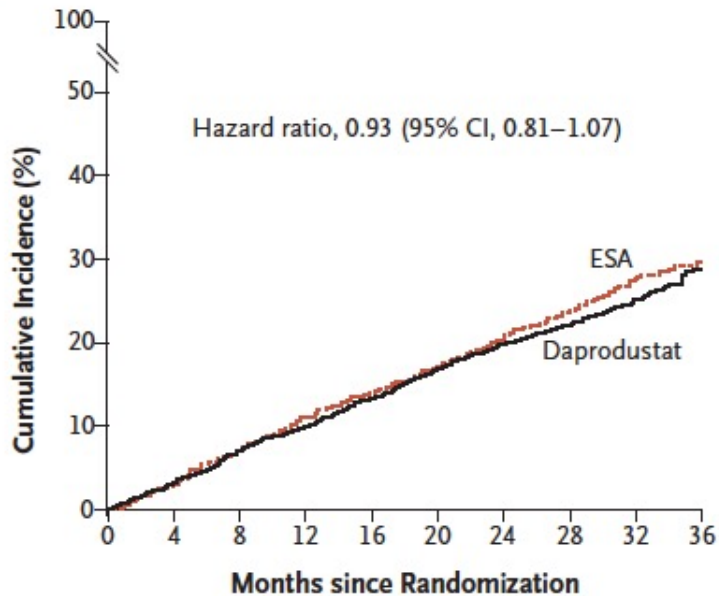


CV MACE: 11.0% dapro vs. 10.0% darbepoetin alfa. Hazard ratio 1.11 (0.91, 1.35)

*Singh AK, et al NEJM 2021; published online ahead of print, Nov 5 2021*

# Daprodustat (CKD-DD)

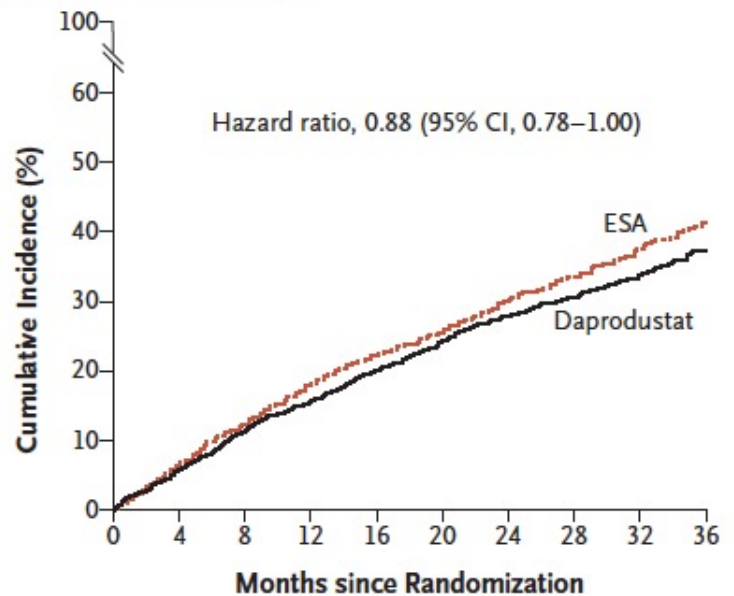
**A MACE**



**No. at Risk**

ESA	1477	1427	1348	1271	1217	1170	1108	836	525	245
Daprodustat	1487	1425	1352	1297	1240	1181	1129	861	559	250

**B MACE or Thromboembolic Event**



**No. at Risk**

ESA	1477	1380	1275	1168	1101	1045	970	732	443	205
Daprodustat	1487	1389	1290	1216	1142	1074	1014	764	485	219

CV MACE: 15.2% dapro vs. 17.4% ESA control. Hazard ratio 0.86 (0.72, 1.03)

*Singh AK, et al NEJM 2021; published online ahead of print, Nov 5 2021*

# Conclusion

- Noninferiority trials are more difficult to interpret
- Valid inference can be jeopardized by inclusion of events that are
  - Implausibly affected by treatment
  - Occur (long) after treatment has been discontinued
- Particular challenge when treatment discontinuation is high and, especially, when differential between randomized groups
- ITT is not a fix and may make things even worse
- The noninferiority margin  $M_1$  becomes less relevant
- Acceptance of noninferiority spuriously optimistic
- And remember in the special case of CKD-anemia trials: standard of care has a **Boxed Warning**

Have fun and be controversial

Thank you