

## LETTER

## COVID-19 mortality increases with northerly latitude after adjustment for age suggesting a link with ultraviolet and vitamin D

Dear Editors,

We read with interest the review by Dr Kohlmeier in which he reported a correlation between COVID-19 mortality among African-Americans across the USA and northern latitude.<sup>1</sup> We previously reported a north-south gradient in global COVID-19 mortality but were conscious that lack of ultraviolet exposure and consequent vitamin D insufficiency was not the only possible explanation.<sup>2</sup> We have now investigated the relationships between latitude, age of population, population density and pollution with COVID-19 mortality.

COVID-19 mortality per million by country was downloaded from <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/> on 18 May 2020.<sup>3</sup> We included all 117 countries with population >1 million and ≥150 COVID-19 cases. Data by country for population %≥65 years, population density and air pollution (particles of matter <2.5µm diameter µg/m<sup>3</sup>) were obtained from public sources.<sup>4-6</sup> Latitude was entered for each country's capital city. The hypothesis was that there was no

relationship between mortality and latitude below a threshold and that thereafter mortality increased with latitude. Mortality data were log transformed, and piecewise linear modelling was used to explore the relationship with latitude. This was adjusted for %≥65, and pollution and population density were investigated to see if they further explained variability in mortality.

The analysis supported the hypothesis with a threshold of 28° north and a model of zero slope below the threshold, and a linear model above the threshold was fitted. The age adjustment was highly significant ( $p<0.0005$ ), with an estimated mortality increase of 13.7% (95% CI 7.4% to 20.3%) for each 1% increase in %≥65. Latitude was also significant ( $p=0.031$ ) with an estimated 4.4% (95% CI 0.4% to 8.5%) increase in mortality for each 1° further north (table 1, figure 1). Countries with higher pollution included many with younger populations, and pollution was negatively associated with mortality but added no significant explanatory power to a model containing latitude and age. Population density expressed per country was not significantly associated with mortality.

The proportion of older people in each country impacts greatly on COVID-19 mortality, but after adjustment for this, a strong association remains across the Northern hemisphere between latitude and higher COVID-19 mortality. This association exists above 28° north not far from the latitude, usually stated as 35°

north, beyond which populations commonly get insufficient ultraviolet B to maintain normal vitamin D blood levels throughout winter. There are exceptions, but COVID-19 mortality correlates with reported vitamin D levels across Europe,<sup>7</sup> and in sunnier Brazil, where mortality is rising, 28% prevalence of vitamin D deficiency is reported.<sup>8</sup> An association between vitamin D insufficiency and COVID-19 severity is supported by substantial evidence of its impact on cytokine response to pathogens.<sup>7</sup> A direct effect of ultraviolet light on the environmental survival of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 is also possible but would not explain the association between mortality and ethnicity,<sup>9</sup> whereas people with dark skin need more ultraviolet exposure for equivalent vitamin D synthesis.

This analysis supports the link between latitude and COVID-19 mortality reported within the USA by Dr Kohlmeier.<sup>1</sup> Evidence linking vitamin D deficiency with COVID-19 severity is circumstantial but growing. Obtaining more direct evidence may be difficult as people could be reluctant to trial a placebo in place of a vitamin supplement. If the association between vitamin D deficiency and COVID-19 severity is causative, the disease should prove seasonal, since more severely affected individuals are infectious for longer. We agree that very high vitamin D doses >4000 IU/day should only be taken in the context of clinical trials<sup>10</sup> but urge that vitamin D supplementation at more moderate dose should

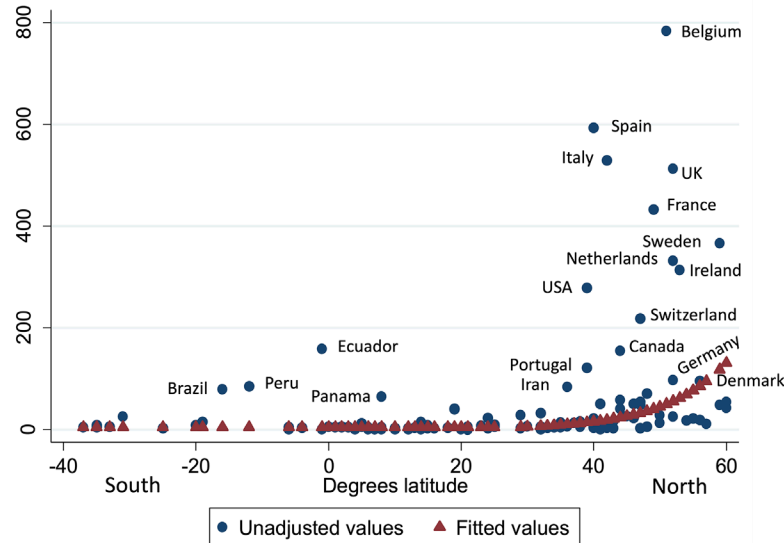
**Table 1** Associations between COVID-19 mortality by country, latitude and % of population ≥65 years

Variable	Regression coefficient	SE	P value	% of variation explained	Effect size (95% CI)*
Univariate models					
Latitude	0.1074	0.0142	<0.0005	33.1	11.3% (8.3% to 14.5%)
%≥65	0.1766	0.0199	<0.0005	40.4	19.3% (14.8% to 24.1%)
Multivariate model					
Latitude	0.0428	0.0196	0.031	43.0	4.4% (0.4% to 8.5%)
%≥65	0.1281	0.0291	<0.0005		13.7% (7.4% to 20.3%)

\*The effect size is, for latitude, the percentage increase in mortality from one location, situated at least 28° north, to another location 1° further north and, for %≥65, the percentage increase in mortality for each one % increase in %≥65.

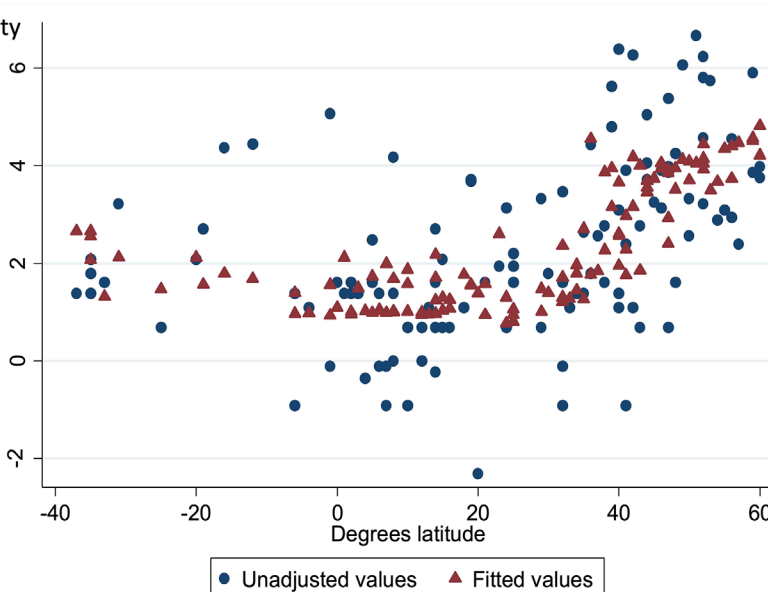
Mortality/ 1M  
population

A



Log mortality

B



**Figure 1** A. COVID-19 mortality per 1 million population by country compared with latitude of capital cities. Fitted values are derived from a piecewise linear model of the logarithm of mortality on latitude. This was based on a threshold of 28° north that explained the greatest amount of variation. B. Logarithm of COVID-19 mortality per 1 million compared with latitude with and without adjustment for age (% ≥ 65 years).

be taken by all those at risk of deficiency, including people with darker skin or living in institutions.

Jonathan Rhodes ,<sup>1</sup> Frank Dunstan,<sup>2</sup> Eamon Laird,<sup>3</sup> Sreedhar Subramanian,<sup>1</sup> Rose A Kenny<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Cellular and Molecular Physiology, University of Liverpool Institute of Translational Medicine, Liverpool, UK

<sup>2</sup>School of Medicine, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

<sup>3</sup>The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing, University of Dublin Trinity College School of Medicine, Dublin, Ireland

<sup>4</sup>Department of Medical Gerontology, St James Hospital, Dublin, Ireland

**Correspondence to** Professor Jonathan Rhodes, Cellular and molecular physiology, University of Liverpool Institute of Translational Medicine, Liverpool L69 3BX, UK; rhodesjm@liverpool.ac.uk

**Correction notice** The paper has been corrected since it was published online. The data in figure 1 and

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## ORCID iD

Jonathan Rhodes <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1302-260X>

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