First-in-human use of a modular capsid virus-like vaccine platform

An open-label, non-randomised, phase 1 clinical trial of the SARS-CoV-2 vaccine ABNCoV2

Smit, Merel J; Sander, Adam F; Ariaans, Maud B P A; Fougeroux, Cyrielle; Heinzel, Constanze; Fendel, Rolf; Esen, Meral; Kremsner, Peter G; Ter Heine, Rob; Wertheim, Heiman F; Idorn, Manja; Paludan, Søren Riis; Underwood, Alexander P; Binderup, Aleksander; Ramirez, Santseharay; Bukh, Jens; Soegaard, Max; Erdogan, Sayit M; Gustavsson, Tobias; Clemmensen, Stine; Theander, Thor G; Salanti, Åli; Hamborg, Mette; de Jongh, Willem A; McCall, Matthew B B; Nielsen, Morten A; Mordmüller, Benjamin G; COUGH-1 trial study group; Dagil, Robert; Goksøyr, Louise; Hulen, Thomas Morgan; Brygger, Christoph Mikkel Janitzek; Khalifé, Paul Karim; Vidal-Calvo, Elena Ethel

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First-in-human use of a modular capsid virus-like vaccine platform: an open-label, non-randomised, phase 1 clinical trial of the SARS-CoV-2 vaccine ABNCoV2


Summary

Background Capsid virus-like particles (cVLP) have proven safe and immunogenic and can be a versatile platform to counter pandemics. We aimed to clinically test a modular cVLP COVID-19 vaccine in individuals who were naive to SARS-CoV-2.

Methods In this phase 1, single-centre, dose-escalation, adjuvant-selection, open-label clinical trial, we recruited participants at the Radboud University Medical Center in Nijmegen, Netherlands, and sequentially assigned them to seven groups. Eligible participants were healthy, aged 18–55 years, and tested negative for SARS-CoV-2 and anti-SARS-CoV-2 antibodies. Participants were vaccinated intramuscularly on days 0 and 28 with 6 µg, 12 µg, 25 µg, 50 µg, or 70 µg of the cVLP-based COVID-19 vaccine (ABNCoV2). A subgroup received MF59-adjuvanted ABNCoV2. Follow-up was for 24 weeks after second vaccination. The primary objectives were to assess the safety and tolerability of ABNCoV2 and to identify a dose that optimises the tolerability–immunogenicity ratio 14 days after the first vaccination. The primary safety endpoint was the number of related grade 3 adverse events and serious adverse events in the intention-to-treat population. The primary immunogenicity endpoint was the concentration of ABNCoV2-specific antibodies. The trial is registered with ClinicalTrials.gov, NCT04839146.

Findings 45 participants (six to nine per group) were enrolled between March 15 and July 15, 2021. Participants had a total of 249 at least possibly related solicited adverse events (185 grade 1, 63 grade 2, and one grade 3) within a week after vaccination. Two serious adverse events occurred; one was classified as a possible adverse reaction. Antibody titres were dose-dependent with levels plateauing at a vaccination dose of 25–70 µg ABNCoV2. After second vaccination, live virus neutralisation activity against major SARS-CoV-2 variants was high but was lower with an omicron (BA.1) variant. Vaccine-specific IFNγ+CD4+ T cells were induced.

Interpretation Immunisation with ABNCoV2 was well tolerated, safe, and resulted in a functional immune response. The data support the need for additional clinical development of ABNCoV2 as a second-generation SARS-CoV-2 vaccine. The modular cVLP platform will accelerate vaccine development, beyond SARS-CoV-2.

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Introduction

As of July 9, 2022, there have been over 550 million cases of COVID-19 worldwide, with more than 6 million deaths.1 Vaccines against SARS-CoV-2, the causative virus, have been instrumental in controlling the pandemic. Vaccination has been implemented globally at unprecedented pace to protect susceptible populations, reduce spread, safeguard health-care systems, and diminish the global social and economic impact of non-pharmaceutical interventions to reduce COVID-19 transmission.2 However, reduced vaccine effectiveness against new SARS-CoV-2 variants, ongoing trans_.mission, and the absence of universal access are major challenges. Heterologous vaccination with different existing COVID-19 vaccines is an approach to broaden protection; however, so far, it has provided little benefit over homologous boosters.3 Second-generation COVID-19 vaccines should ideally induce durable cross-protective and transmission-blocking immune responses, while being compatible with globally equitable use.

We developed a novel modular vaccine platform based on capsid virus-like particles (cVLP) that are used as scaffolds for antigen display.4 This cVLP platform uses a split-protein Tag–Catcher conjugation system (similar to the SpyTag–SpyCatcher technology)5 to allow for directional, high-density, covalent attachment of protein antigens on the cVLP surface. This cVLP platform was...
In the COVID-19 pandemic, mRNA vaccines, and then vectored SARS-CoV-2 vaccines, spearheaded market entry, whereas protein-based candidates failed in early clinical development due to low immunogenicity. Virus-like particle (VLP) vaccines are highly immunogenic, safe, and can be effective over long periods of time (eg, against human papillomavirus); however, development of VLP-based vaccines is often precluded by complex manufacturing procedures and the limited propensity of antigens to spontaneously form particles. We developed a simple modular capsid VLP platform that allows rapid development of VLP-based vaccines and we aimed for proof-of-concept with the SARS-CoV-2 vaccine ABNCoV2. ABNCoV2 generated robust vaccine dose-dependent neutralising antibody responses in preclinical studies and protected SARS-CoV-2-challenged Rhesus macaques. We report results of the first-in-human trial of ABNCoV2. We searched PubMed on Aug 4, 2022, for clinical trials testing SARS-CoV-2 virus-like particle vaccines with search terms “SARS-CoV-2 AND vaccine AND (VLP OR virus-like) AND (clinical trial [Filter])”, with no restrictions on publication date or language. We found one publication that reported the interim safety and immunogenicity data of a phase 1 trial with a plant-derived virus-like particle vaccine for COVID-19.

Ethical approval was granted by the Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (NL76192.000.20). The trial is registered with ClinicalTrials.gov (NCT04839146) and the Netherlands Trial Register (NL9334).

Procedures
ABNCoV2 was administered by two intramuscular injections of 0·5 mL, 28 days apart, in the deltoïd muscle of the non-dominant arm and, subsequently, the other arm. At each dose escalation, one participant was inoculated, followed by the rest of the group one week later, together with the first participant of the next group. Follow-up visits were done on days 1, 2, 7, and 14 after each vaccination and on days 42, 91, and 168 after the second vaccination. Adverse events were captured during on-site visits, through structured diaries, and by daily monitoring of body temperature for 1 week after each vaccination. Local and systemic adverse events were solicited until 7 days after ABNCoV2 administration. Unsolicited adverse events and serious adverse events (SAEs) were recorded until the end of study.

Allocation to dosage and combination with MF59-adjuvant was by sequence of enrolment. The predefined escalation schedule started with 6 μg (groups 1A and 1B), followed by 12 μg (groups 2A and 2B), 25 μg (groups 3A, 3B, and 6), 50 μg (groups 4 and 7), and 70 μg (group 5)
ABNCoV2. Dose escalation occurred in groups of six participants, starting with split groups for the first three lowest doses, in which half (n=3) of the participants received the non-adjuvanted vaccine (groups 1A, 2A, and 3A) and half received the MF59-adjuvanted vaccine (groups 1B, 2B, and 3B). Additional dose escalation and the decision of whether to use adjuvant in group 4 and above depended on a review of the accumulated data up to 14 days after first vaccination in group 3B by an independent Safety Monitoring Committee (SMC). At completion of the dose escalation, the two doses nearest the optimal tolerability–immunogenicity ratio continued enrolment (into groups 6 and 7) until 12 participants received these doses of ABNCoV2.

Participants were allowed to enrol into the Dutch SARS-CoV-2 vaccination programme on the condition that it was later than 4 weeks after the final scheduled ABNCoV2 vaccination. In those enrolled in the national programme, additional follow-up visits before and two weeks after the additional vaccination were done. ABNCoV2 consists of the Acinetobacter Phage 205 (AP205) cVLP produced in Escherichia coli and the Wuhan SARS-CoV-2 Spike RBD antigen aa319–591 (RBD; QIA0044.1), expressed in S2 cells (appendix p 9). Upon mixing the two components, a covalent isopeptide bond forms between the split-protein Tag and Catcher, which are genetically fused to the cVLP and antigen sequence, respectively.1 The final purified RBD-cVLP contains roughly 72 RBD antigens per particle. ABNCoV2 was stored frozen at −20°C (+5°C) and reconstituted in phosphate buffered saline with and without MF59. Formulated vaccines were stored at 2–8°C and used within 24 h.

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ABNCoV2 vaccination. The funders had no role in study design, data collection, and interpretation, or writing of the report.

Results
Screening took place between March 11, 2021, and June 14, 2021. In total, 45 eligible individuals who were naive to SARS-CoV-2 were enrolled and allocated to one of seven groups (six to nine per group; figure I). Baseline demographics of the participants were similar among groups (table). Vaccinations were given between March 15, 2021, and July 15, 2021. The second ABNCoV2
Vaccination was given outside the prespecified time window (27–29 days) for two (4%) participants (day 30 and 35) for logistical reasons. 44 (98%) of 45 participants completed all the follow-ups. One (2%) participant in group 3A did not attend the final follow-up visit in person due to emigration but was included in the analysis. An additional unscheduled visit was conducted after the occurrence of a suspected unexpected serious adverse reaction (SUSAR). The final study visit was on Feb 25, 2022.

Every participant had at least one adverse event. In total, 651 adverse event episodes occurred (465 grade 1, 175 grade 2, 9 grade 3, two SAE). Of those adverse events, 249 (38%) were solicited (185 grade 1, 63 grade 2, and one grade 3). Overall, ABNCoV2 was well tolerated (figure 2A and figure 2B). One unrelated SAE occurred 8 days after the second vaccination in a participant from group 7 (traumatic ligament rupture requiring hospitalisation). A second SAE was a superficial basal cell carcinoma on each upper arm in a participant from group 1B. The superficial basal cell carcinoma was diagnosed approximately 16 weeks after the second vaccination. The participant had Fitzpatrick skin type 114 and a medical history of basal cell carcinoma and melanoma. Based on the temporal and anatomical relationship between basal cell carcinoma and vaccination, the adverse event was classified as a SUSAR. It was successfully treated by radical excision. No further lesions were detected in any of the other participants during the study, including in an extra visit after the last planned follow-up.

Two laboratory abnormalities occurred. One participant had grade 1 eosinophilia on day 7 after the second administration of 25 µg ABNCoV2. Another participant had dacrocytes (teardrop-shaped erythrocytes) in the whole blood cell count on day 7 after second vaccination was given outside the prespecified time window (27–29 days) for two (4%) participants (day 30 and 35) for logistical reasons. 44 (98%) of 45 participants completed all the follow-ups. One (2%) participant in group 3A did not attend the final follow-up visit in person due to emigration but was included in the analysis. An additional unscheduled visit was conducted after the occurrence of a suspected unexpected serious adverse reaction (SUSAR). The final study visit was on Feb 25, 2022.

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Two laboratory abnormalities occurred. One participant had grade 1 eosinophilia on day 7 after the second administration of 25 µg ABNCoV2. Another participant had dacrocytes (teardrop-shaped erythrocytes) in the whole blood cell count on day 7 after second
administration of 50 μg ABNCoV2. Other haematological parameters were normal in these two patients. Both laboratory abnormalities were not associated with symptoms and normalised at the next follow-up visit (7 days later). ABNCoV2 induced seroconversion after the second vaccination in all participants irrespective of...
The concentration of RBD-specific antibodies of the groups receiving the optimal doses up to day 42 after the first vaccination is shown by locally estimated scatterplot smoothing fit local regression (figure 3C). The concentration of RBD-specific antibodies decayed gradually during the follow-up and could be boosted with a licensed SARS-CoV-2 vaccine in participants receiving the optimal doses (figure 3D, appendix p 10). RBD-specific CD4+ T cells were induced following immunisation with two doses of ABNCoV2 (figure 4A). The phenotype of responding CD4+ T cells was mainly IFNγ positive, with most of the cells coexpressing TNF and CD137 (appendix p 9). Some cells also expressed the degranulation marker CD107a. The 50 µg vaccine dose induced a higher CD4+ T-cell response than 25 µg ABNCoV2, but this did not extend to the 70 µg dosage. SARS-CoV-2 RBD-specific CD8+ T cells were only marginally increased (figure 4B). Robust in-vitro activity was observed in live virus neutralisation assays 14 days after the second vaccination. PRNT₅₀ titres were induced by all the different ABNCoV2 doses tested with and without adjuvant MF59 against an early B.1 isolate, FR-4286, representing ancestral variants. The WHO 20/136 standard (appendix p 13) lies in the same range as the neutralising antibody titres after vaccination with adjuvanted ABNCoV2 and at doses higher than 25 µg (figure 4C). Post-hoc analysis showed six-fold (95% CI 3–11) higher levels of in-vitro neutralisation activity in adjuvanted than in non-adjuvanted vaccinees. Furthermore, strong cross neutralisation was seen using serum samples from the 25 µg ABNCoV2 dose groups with and without MF59 adjuvant for the early B.1 isolate (FR-4286) and for variants of concern B.1.1.7 (alpha), B.1.351 (beta), and B.1.617.2 (delta; figure 4D). There was no reduction in neutralisation capacity against alpha or delta. A 2.2-fold reduction was seen against the beta variant virus. An independent neutralisation assay showed a 66-fold decrease in activity when comparing the omicron BA.1 with an ancestral variant (D614G; figure 4E). The same trend towards higher neutralisation titres in vaccinees receiving adjuvanted ABNCoV2 was present.

**Discussion**

In this first-in-human clinical trial of ABNCoV2, we tested a modular cVLP platform that combines flexibility in the selection of antigens with improved immunogenicity as well as good tolerability and safety in preclinical models. We found that ABNCoV2 was well tolerated and induced high IgG antibody responses against the SARS-CoV-2 RBD, peaking at 2 weeks after the second vaccination. Serum samples showed functional activity against major SARS-CoV-2 variants, antibody concentrations remained high over several months, and cellular responses were robust, with a T-helper-1 cell pattern indicative of a protective immune

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**Figure 3: SARS-CoV-2 RBD-specific antibodies**

Vertical lines indicate the first and second ABNCoV2 vaccination (28 days after first vaccination). (A) Concentration of RBD-specific antibodies of groups 1 to 3 (6 µg, 12 µg, and 25 µg ABNCoV2, non-adjuvanted [groups labelled A] and MF59-adjuvanted [groups labelled B]) up to day 42 after the first vaccination (14 days after the second vaccination). (B) Concentration of RBD-specific antibodies of groups 1A, 2A, 3A, 4, and 5 (6 µg, 12 µg, 25 µg, 50 µg, and 70 µg) 14 days after second vaccination. (C) Concentration of RBD-specific antibodies of groups receiving the optimal doses 25 µg and 50 µg ABNCoV2 until day 42 after the first vaccination. (D) Concentration of RBD-specific antibodies of groups receiving the optimal doses 25 µg and 50 µg ABNCoV2 until day 196 after the first vaccination (end-of-study visit). Different colours indicate types of licensed SARS-CoV-2 vaccines that participants received during the follow-up period. RBD = receptor binding domain.
The immune response to the vaccine antigen was dose-dependent and MF59 showed a dose-sparing effect. At a dosage of 25 µg and higher the serosparing effect became saturated, albeit with a tendency towards higher vaccine-specific T-cell numbers at a dose of 50 µg. Virus neutralisation activity was present after the second vaccination and from a vaccine dose of 25 µg upwards at levels similar to the WHO standard 20/136. Neutralisation activity was broad with about two-fold reduced activity against the beta variant virus. Of note, a more than ten-fold reduction was reported for BNT162b2.16 MF59 had a positive effect on virus neutralisation. Concentrations of neutralising antibodies against the omicron clade were significantly lower but similar to approved vaccines before updating to omicron BA.1 and BA.5.17 Whether ABNCoV2 will also need to be updated is currently being investigated in late-stage clinical development of ABNCoV2 (NCT05329220 and NCT05077267). A main advantage of the modular Tag–Catcher-AP205 capsid-like particle vaccine design of ABNCoV2 is the possibility to replace the current vaccine antigen relatively quickly in the event that the SARS-CoV-2 virus should acquire mutations in the RBD domain reducing the efficacy of the ABNCoV2 vaccine. ABNCoV2’s tolerability was independent of dose, adjuvant, and time (first vs second vaccination). This pattern is similar to other VLP vaccines (eg, against human papillomavirus18), whereas mRNA and vectored SARS-CoV-2 vaccines are more reactogenic.19,20 During the follow-up, two cases of basal cell carcinoma occurred in one participant and were reported as a SUSAR. Basal cell carcinoma is common and its associated mortality is very low.21 Ultraviolet radiation is the main risk factor for basal cell carcinoma, but it can develop, although rarely, on scar tissue, including vaccination scars. Basal cell carcinoma has been reported after vaccination for smallpox,22 Bacillus Calmette-Guérin,23 influenza,24 typhoid, and hepatitis A.25 The SUSAR occurred in a participant with a predisposition to skin malignancies and no additional skin anomalies were found, even when actively screened for. Nevertheless, and despite the low probability of an ABNCoV2-specific causal link, monitoring of late local reactions shall be included as clinical development progresses.

The size and design of the trial, as well as the inclusion of participants in the ongoing national vaccination campaign, precluded measuring the protective efficacy of ABNCoV2. Efficacy in preclinical models has translated reasonably well into humans for other SARS-CoV-2 vaccine candidates.26 Analogously, promising results from preclinical studies of ABNCoV2, including challenge experiments,27 as well as antibody levels and consistent virus neutralisation (as a proxy of protection)27 in the current trial, advocate for ongoing clinical development of this vaccine candidate. Antibody responses induced by ABNCoV2 were in the same range as those induced after two doses of BNT162b2 and responses were boosted to peak levels in individuals receiving a heterologous vaccine

Figure 4: Cellular and functional immune response against SARS-CoV-2

IFNγ+ cells after stimulation with SARS-CoV-2 Spike RBD class 1 and class 2 restricted pooled peptides on CD4+ T cells (A) and CD8+ T cells (B). Values are corrected for activation (no peptide). (C) SARS-CoV-2 neutralisation responses. The red line indicates the WHO 20/136 standard. (D) Virus neutralisation of alpha (B.1.1.7), beta (B.1.351), delta (B.1.617.2), and FR-4286 (B.1). Red stars indicate PRNT50 values of the WHO standard 20/136. (E) Neutralisation titres (ID50) from vaccination groups 3A (n=3), 3B (n=3), and 6 (n=3) against the ancestral D614G, delta, and omicron SARS-CoV-2 variants. I1−3=3 days before the first vaccination, I2+14=14 days after first vaccination, I2=12–14 days before the second vaccination, and at least one other vaccination. PRNT50, 50% plaque reduction neutralisation test.

Two participants who received 25 µg ABNCoV2 tested positive for SARS-CoV-2, 16 and 20 weeks after the second vaccination. Both participants had received one dose of BNT162b2 before the SARS-CoV-2 infection, with one participant receiving the dose 9 weeks before and the other 12 weeks after vaccination. These participants had moderate COVID-19-related symptoms, and one of them developed a grade 3 (39–40°C) fever. Whole-genome sequencing revealed delta variant (B.1.617) sub-lineage AY.122 for one and no result for the other participant, in whom viral load was very low. Of note, ten participants remained SARS-CoV-2 negative despite high-risk exposures; five who only received ABNCoV2 and five with at least one other vaccination.

The predefined immunogenicity criterion of our escalation design was based on primary data from previous trials with soluble protein vaccine candidates,29,30 showing that antibody response following first vaccination had discriminatory power for dose selection.
Additionally, the target product profile of WHO included immunogenicity following one vaccination. This approach turned out not to be optimal, as, after one vaccination, the response was low, variable, and did not predict response following second vaccination well. Hence, two immunisations are, at minimum, required for ABNCoV2 in vaccinees who are naive to SARS-CoV-2. cVLPs structurally resemble native viruses and can be highly immunogenic, in particular due to their size, which enables them to be drained directly to the lymph nodes, and their repetitive surface epitope display. cVLPs overcome risks of highly effective live attenuated vaccines (eg, vaccine-induced disease or reversion) but their immunogenicity is comparable. With ABNCoV2, we observed a dose-sparing effect that saturated at 25 µg when MF59 was added, which might be beneficial for large-scale use. Implementation will also be facilitated after development of formulations of ABNCoV2 with less stringent storage requirements from freezer to room temperature, particularly for its use in remote areas or regions with ineffective health infrastructures.

This trial had several limitations. The durability of the immune responses could not be measured in most participants as nearly all (43 of 45) received a licensed SARS-CoV-2 vaccine during the follow-up of the trial; the study population of mostly young healthy adults was not representative of the population most in need of second-generation SARS-CoV-2 vaccines; the trial was not powered to measure efficacy against infection or disease; only a relatively small set of regimens was tested; and there was no control group with a licensed vaccine, as there were no licensed vaccines available at the start of the trial.

In conclusion, the results of this trial show that ABNCoV2 was well tolerated and induced strong virus neutralising antibody responses after the second vaccination in healthy adults who are naive to SARS-CoV-2. The protein-based ABNCoV2 vaccine is not expected to require ultra-cold storage conditions (−20 and −70°C), as opposed to currently approved mRNA-based COVID-19 vaccines, easing global distribution. These findings support additional clinical development of ABNCoV2 as a second-generation vaccine and show the potential of the modular cVLP platform.

COUGH-1 study group
Robert Dalgel PhD, Louise Goksøyr MSc, Thomas M Hulen MSc, Christoph Janitzek PhD, Paul K Khalilé MSc, and Elena Vidal-Calvo MSc (Centre for Medical Parasitology, Department for Immunology and Microbiology, Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark); Daniel S Jensen MSc and Telma Laça PhD, Sune Justesen PhD, and Olivia Lie-Andersen PhD (Immunitrack ApS, Copenhagen, Denmark); Andrea Kreidenwess PhD (Institute of Tropical Medicine, University Hospital Tübingen, Tübingen, Germany); Karina Treelen (Department of Medical Microbiology, Radboud Institute for Molecular Life Sciences, Radboud University Medical Center, Nijmegen, Netherlands).

Contributors
MJS, MBBM, MAN, ME, and BGM conceived the study and developed the study protocol. WAdJ, MAN, AFS, and BGM acquired funding. MBBM and BGM provided oversight and supervision. HFWM was the sponsor’s representative of the trial. CF, CH, and RF did the antibody assays. MI, SRP, APU, AB, SR, and JB did the virus neutralisation assays. DSJ, SJ, TL, and OL-A (COUGH-1 trial study group) did the T-cell analysis. BM did the statistical analysis. MJS and KT (COUGH-1 trial study group), MBPAA, MBBM, and BGM coordinated the trial and oversaw data collection and management. MJS, AFs, MBPAA, CF, CH, RF, WAdJ, MBBM, MAN, and BGM analysed and verified the data. MJS, AFs, MBPAA, CF, CH, RF, MI, WAdJ, MBBM, MAN, and BGM analysed the data. MJS, AFs, MBPAA, CF, MAN, and BGM wrote the original draft of the manuscript. CH, RF, ME, PGK, RH1, HFWM, MI, SRP, APU, AB, SR, JB, MS, SME, TG, SC, TGT, AS, MH, and WAdJ, and RD, LG, TMH, CJ, DSJ, SJ, PPK, AK, TL, OL-A, KT, and EV-C (COUGH-1 trial study group) reviewed the manuscript. All authors had access to the data in the study and had final responsibility for the decision to submit for publication.

Declaration of interests
MAN, AFs, AS, TGT, and CJ are listed as coinventors on a patent application covering the AP205 CLP vaccine platform technology (WO2016112921 Al) licensed to AdaptVac. CF, AFs, and WAdJ are employees at AdaptVac, a company commercialising virus-like particle display technology and vaccines, including several patents.

Data sharing
Deidentified participant data that underlie the results reported in this Article will be made available on request. Proposals should be directed to the corresponding author, benjamin.mordmueller@radboudumc.nl. Proposals will be reviewed and approved by the sponsor on the basis of compliance with the informed consent and scientific merit. After approval of a proposal, data requesters will need to sign a data access agreement. Data can be requested indefinitely.

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