**Supplemental material**

**Detection of occult hepatitis C virus infection with a highly sensitive combined ultracentrifugation/RT-PCR method:**

To detect OCI, a highly sensitive method was used to detect HCV RNA traces in whole blood in all patients who had negative HCV RNA with the routine method (n=52). For this analysis, 2.5 ml whole blood samples were collected and stored in PAXgene Blood RNA tubes (Qiagen, Valencia, CA, USA). The PAXgene Blood RNA Kit (Qiagen, Valencia, CA, USA) was used for the isolation of total RNA. HCV RNA was amplified in a nested polymerase chain reaction (PCR). In a first reaction, RNA was reverse transcribed at 43°C for 20 min and a 327 base pair fragment of the HCV 5’-untranslated region amplified by PCR by using the outer primer pair Ofor (sense) 5’-CATGGTGCACGGTCTACGAGACC-3’ and Orev (antisense) 5’-GGCGACACTCCACCATAGATC-3’. In the outer PCR, an initial denaturation at 94°C for 5 minutes was followed by 35 cycles of 94°C for 1 minute, 45°C for 2 minutes and 72°C for 3 minutes, finalized by 5 minutes at 72°C. The outer PCR product was further amplified in a second PCR reaction by using the inner primer pair Ifor (sense) 5’-TCGCAAGCACCCTATCAGGCAG-3’ and Irev (antisense) 5’-GGAACTACTGTCTTCACGCAGA-3’ resulting in an inner PCR product of 260 base pairs in length. For the inner PCR, an initial denaturation at 94°C for 1 minute was followed by 35 cycles of 94°C for 30 seconds, 50°C for 30 seconds and 72°C for 1 minute, finalized by 3 minutes at 72°C. The specificity of the inner PCR product was confirmed by restriction digest with Hae III (ThermoFisher Scientific) resulting in 2 fragments with 227 and 33 base pairs in length. Sequencing of the final PCR products was performed (MWG, Ebersberg, Germany).